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The Discriminatory Discourses of Self-Sacrifice: State and Dissident Martyrs in Post-
Revolutionary Iran

Shahla Talebi

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ABSTRACT

The Discriminatory Discourses of Self-Sacrifice: State and Dissident Martyrs in Post-Revolutionary Iran

Shahla Talebi

This dissertation, “The Discriminatory Discourses of Self-sacrifice: The State and the Dissident Martyrs in Post-revolutionary Iran,” examines the sociopolitical, cultural, and religious transfigurations of martyrdom and self-sacrifice in recent Iranian history. It comparatively explores the discourses and praxes of self-sacrifice among the families of two distinct groups: those killed in the Iran-Iraq War, or “state martyrs,” and those executed by the state, or “dissident martyrs.” I explore the ways in which shared cultural and linguistic referents, collective memories, and embodied practices have shaped, and been shaped by, the discourse of self-sacrifice. I also demonstrate how manipulations of these collective referents, particularly those which concern martyrdom, have been critical to the formation and the contestation of hegemonic discourses in contemporary Iran. This dissertation introduces a new conceptualization of these particular metaphors and of their relationship to the Revolution and to post-revolutionary Iran. I use the terms “metaphoric discourses” and “discursive metaphors” to imply and encompass the complexity, resilience, and in-flexibility of specific memories and metaphors in Iranian society and in the 1979 Revolution. By “metaphoric discourses,” I refer to those discourses that come to stand for something else, either linguistically or conceptually. While I reckon the metaphoric quality of all discourses, I consider the Karbala narrative a particular metaphoric discourse that has at once enabled and curtailed contemporary Iranian sociopolitical discourses and languages. I also venture to suggest the term

“discursive metaphor” to delineate those kinds of metaphors that, as in Talal Asad’s notion of discursive tradition, are demarcated by and bounded to a core set of simultaneously continuous yet transforming and transformative stories and beliefs. The dialectic of this continuity and contingency and the apparently immutable yet historically living discursive metaphors is exemplified in their elastic embodiment in social practices and institutions and their manifestation in everyday life of the subjects of this research. I propose that *shabih khāni* (the religious reenactment of the Karbala Event) is a pertinent example of such a discursive metaphor. To illuminate these dynamics, I trace the epitomes and effects of the state-produced discourse of martyrdom in such sites as cemeteries, museums of war and martyrdom, the media, jokes, dreams, and bodily practices. I argue that particular collective memories, linguistic and conceptual metaphors, and religious, cultural, and literary symbols, have been, and continue to be, indispensable to the history of dominant power in modern Iran. I also show that these elements are, at the same time, the very means with which to transgress hegemonic discourses. This dissertation accompanies people in and out of the labyrinth of their dreams, struggles, and disappointments and making history.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements are one of the trickiest genres of writing. They are like signifiers that signify two things at once. One highlights one's own achievement, while humbly recognizing others' role in it. This ambivalent quality was revealed to me only when I tried to write the acknowledgements for this dissertation. This did not come to me because of a sense of accomplishment in reaching my goal in this dissertation. On the contrary, I began to wonder, as I came closer to having to think about it as "done," whether or not this writing would resonate with the subjects of this project who so graciously shared their life stories and their views and experiences with me. Would my advisors find any trace of their devotion, intellect, brilliant insights, and generous exchange of ideas in my work? Could this writing offer a decent translation of the confidence and trust with which they endowed me all along? These were only some of the concerns that made the writing of acknowledgements a nearly impossible task for me. My every attempt in writing it resulted in a disconcerting reflection about how great my debt was and how little I had offered in "return."

On the one hand, in one way or another, any ethnographic representation is inherently reductive. This problem was rendered even more salient in regard to such an ambitiously broad and complex project as this one, particularly in light of the current heightened sensibility-hostility toward Iran and Islam in the Western world today. On the other hand, I was very much aware of so many more theoretical interventions and literary resources that could have enriched this writing. No less haunting was the dilemma of language and representation and their limitations. I was, for instance, keen to the fact that while I was claiming to disrupt the dichotomies of secularism-religion, private-public,

modernity-tradition, I had myself not found any radically different way to engage these issues without succumbing to the same categories. It was also an agonizing reality that I so full-heartedly intended to avoid creating rigid boundaries between the “state” and the “people” but even this had not held up as I had wished for. In addition to these problems, there was still a far greater issue at stake in the writing of these acknowledgements.

This dilemma had mainly to do with what I had envisioned this “research” to be about and what it seemed to have come to. My motivation to work on this project was not derived from a fascination with “exotic places or theoretical interventions. I had rather breathed along with the subjects of this “project,” experienced so much of their suffering, dreamed many of their dreams and was haunted by some similar ghosts. I, too, had stood on the threshold of death and life, madness and what we consider serenity; yet, somehow I had remained on this side, where I had made the choice to write about untimely deaths, discriminatory recognitions of self-sacrifices and the innovative ways of surviving, living, and mourning the loss of their loved ones. I assumed as my ethical responsibility to look violence in the face and seek and hope for alternative ways of living justly in the world that is so absurdly enmeshed in violence and injustice. I thought of my work as a task to open up venues for the silent voices to speak from and to the hearts so that hostilities are mitigated. I took it on myself to challenge my own limitations in relating to the suffering of those who had not been on the side I had once seen myself.

Yet here I was, writing about untimely deaths, while conversing with the dead seemed to call for my own, untimely? Death. The dead kept calling me, night after night but in order to meet the deadlines, if not silence, I had to at least keep them at bay. The

simple fact that I had chosen to live meant that I had agreed to play the game of the market economy. I had to write in a language that was academically marketable, cite others who had written in the same language and limit the stories of suffering and violence within the confinement of their desirability to the market, not too overwhelming, not too sentimental, not too graphic, not too

In choosing to outlive this writing, I yet again found myself in the position of a survivor, though this survival was no longer a random one but a subjective choice on my part. It was this decision to survive that allowed for this writing to come to an “end” while the flames of the desire and inclination to begin a new journey to unearth much deeper unexplored underground and fly around for new horizons kept burning inside me. Even in writing these acknowledgements, I am indebted to all the people who so generously taught me with their way of being to think of this work and of my growing gratitude to these gifts as a process, a constantly becoming conscience.

First and foremost my heartfelt thanks go to all the subjects of this project who trusted me, allowed me into their homes and their lives, befriended me, and taught me about extraordinary resilience and compassions of hearts. I am so grateful to the youngsters who reminded me that life is also about living and not merely about planning for the future that one might not even see. Their enduring lessons urged me, as I was struggling both in writing this dissertation and these acknowledgments, not to ignore the significance of minor changes by dreaming only of radical transformations. The enormity of my debt to my committee members compels me to only console myself that my ongoing attempt to challenge myself would indicate the enduring impact they have had and will continue to have on my intellectual and ethical growth. Since my

admission at Columbia, seven years ago, again and again, Professor Brinkley Messick has put his trust in me-- the trust I had so often lost myself. I am so thankful for his always serene support and encouragement and to his openness to other ways of thinking as well as his down-to-earth attitude that is a model of mentorship I aspire. Professor Rosalind Morris has shown me the beauty and possibility of brilliant and responsible scholarship, stimulating intellect and serious critical engagement. Her profoundly critical comments and insights have opened up me new venues and stimulated my curiosity and desire in pursuit of intellectual endeavor. Professor Lila Abu-Lughod's compassionate, constructive and profound and meticulously detailed feedbacks are only one indication of the much deeper humanity she has taught me about. I have no way of expressing my gratitude to the fact that her heart, her mind, her office and her home were all treasures she shared with me with incredible grace and generosity. Her unceasing passion to take new paths and never sit comfortably with her accomplishments is an ideal of scholarship of which I dream of. To have Professor Hamid Dabashi in my committee was an opportunity that I could not be more grateful about. One cannot but admire his amazing knowledge, especially of Iran, and his sensitive and critical mind which find a pleasantly surprising parallel in his incredible cooking skill and his hospitality. That Professor Stefania Pandolfo would fly all the way from Berkeley to be a member of my defense committee was more than I could have fantasized. Her passionate support for my work when I was an undergraduate had already offered me a great source of encouragement. Her willingness to be in my PhD defense marked her presence not merely as a committee member, a great scholar with her always sharp and unwavering comments that disavow any sense of comfort and stagnation of mind , but also as if a family member.

None of my family members were present during the writing of this dissertation. Losing my father, right before I was to begin my research, felt like surviving without the essence of survival, like living and believing in utopias at the age when believing in them is considered a passé. And yet, I chose to write, as if imitating my father who chose to remain a believer in the possibility of his survival at the very moment of its negation. His determination and encouragement never ceased, nor did my mother's unbounded love and her understanding of significance of this work for me, despite her inability to read it. Her vast heart in which she seemed to hold a world, in love, lightened my moments of despair as I wrote about violence. I am very much indebted to all my siblings, relatives and friends who never failed to lend me their emotional support.

I am grateful to all the faculty of our department from whom I learned not only in the formal class settings but in the friendly and random conversations, including but not limited to Professors Partha Chatterjee, Valentine E. Daniel, Nick Dricks, Nadia Abu El-Haj, Marilyn Ivy, Mahmood Mamdani, Neni Panourgia, John Pemberton, David Scott, and Michael Taussig. I am all gratitude for Joyce Mongus who was a treasure in the department office for most of my years at Columbia as well as an amazing human being and friend. The office was also a lovely place to come to, many thanks to Juana Cabrera and Marilyn Astwood and their great sense of humor and strong characters. I am thankful to Xiomara Perez-Betances and Michael Chin. I also thank all the people in my department who reminded me, intentionally or not, of the stage I was going to be or had already been, during the last couple of years. I appreciate not only those who offered their words of advice and support, but perhaps even more those who generously asked

and allowed me to share my experience and my little tips with them. I would like to thank Sonali Pahwa for her help in proofreading.

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A Note about Transliteration

The reader might find differences in transliterations in this text from other works. I have chosen not to use the formal transliterations of Farsi into Latin. This is an intentional attempt to convey the language and pronunciations that are commonly used in Farsi. Except in citing others, or when the words are directly taken from Arabic—not when they have entered into Farsi and are pronounced differently from their Arabic form—and when they are names that are already commonly used in a particular way in academic texts in English, my transliterations follow Farsi versions of the words. I have used “Ā” and “ā” for the short A that is pronounced “uh” and that generally occurs, in Farsi, at the beginning of a word, as in the name Apollo. For example, I write Āb for “water” which in Farsi is written as “آب.” The letter “ā” is also used for the same sound, “uh” except that, in Farsi, it is positioned in the middle of the word, as in the English name Mark or “Marāsem” (ceremonies) in Farsi. Finally “A” and “a” stand for the short “A,” as in apple. Since in Farsi, pronunciation of the letters “غ” and “ق” is the same, I have employed “gh” to stand for both of them, instead of the common practice in English transliterations to use both “Q” and “gh” respectively.

Introduction

By now, he was already on the verge of forgetting, and had been brought up sharply only by the mother's voice after not hearing it for a long time. Nothing should be removed, ...he could not do without the positive effects of the furniture on his state of mind. And if the furniture interfered with his senselessly crawling about, then it was a great asset and no loss (Kafka, 1995).

Desacralization and the Sacred

Early one morning in 2006, I woke up to my ringing phone. On the other end of the line, Poyān, a young college student and a son of a former leftist inmate, asked if he had awakened me. "It is Ok," I told him, "I was just about to get up and begin writing, anyway." I am sure I still sounded sleepy when I asked him: "What's up?" This long distance communication is a bizarre thing, especially if the time is as different as between Tehran and New York—Tehran is nine hours ahead. One has not even begun one's day, has not even had the chance to recognize one's waking feelings when the person on the other end of the line speaks about exhaustion, boredom, and so on. I was precisely at this stage of not yet having awakened to my feelings when Poyān said: "Oh, I don't know. I feel so bored and depressed today; just calling to chat." Perhaps that was why his answer seemed so out of place to me, as if it were coming from my dreams. Yet, I was awake enough to worry and the first worries in my mind—now that I knew nothing really bad had happened to him—had to do with money and governments. I was nervous about phone bills and the risk of phones being tapped by the governments on the two ends of the line in the US and in Iran. "Why don't you call your friends to go out with them?" I

asked him, immediately adding, “I am concerned about your phone bill. You’ve been calling me too often.”¹

His response was in line with his philosophy of life, or in his own words, to “do whatever makes you happy at any given moment and leave worrying about tomorrow to tomorrow.” Not surprisingly, therefore, he instantly said: “I don’t care. I just wanted to talk to you.” I knew that trying to convince him otherwise would only lengthen our conversation. I therefore simply asked him to hang up the phone so that I could call him back. “Now tell me why you feel depressed. Why don’t you go out?” I must have sounded less anxious now that, at least, the financial burden was lifted off his, in fact off his parents’ shoulders. His answer reminded me again that no matter how hard I tried to be involved in daily life in Iran, I was still an outsider. “Don’t you remember?” he said, as though blaming me for a lapse of memory, “It’s Moharram here.² You know how miserable this town gets in Moharram, no?”

The town in which Poyān went to college is well known for its intense commemoration of the month of Moharram. Poyān was, however, born and raised in a town in Northern Iran which is famous for its relatively relaxed religious atmosphere. Moreover, his parents, who were originally Muslims, have been atheists since before he was born. So, when I told Poyān that he could go out and watch “dasteh” (group of male mourners who march in groups while either beating their chests or flagellating

¹ I expressed concern about his phone bill, but I was in fact also thinking about my own, for most of the time when he calls me, I ask him to hang up so that I can call him back. My phone bill had thus been sky rocketing in the last few months. But I was more concerned that these regular phone calls with the high possibility that phone conversations between Iran and the US might be tapped on both sides. Poyān is by no means a cautious person and we had had several discussions about the way I feel nervous about the kind of conversations he carries out on the phone; the jokes he tells me are often either about state officials, clergy members or religious matters, if not all three at once.

² Moharram was the month during which Imam Hussein, the Third Imam of Shi`i and his companions were killed in the seventh century in the desert of Karbala and at the hands of Yazid, the Caliph of the time.

themselves), I was prepared to hear that it was no fun to do so or a similar response. But I was totally puzzled when he said: “It won’t benefit me. I am totally straight.” Once again, as many other encounters I had had with youngsters in Iran, I needed translation even though we both spoke the “same” language, Farsi. But the main shock hit when, through translation, the connotation of his remark was revealed to me.

Poyān’s playful and vague responses to my questions compelled me to ask more questions which eventually meant to play his game. I was not sure if he was just pretending or if he was genuinely surprised about my unfamiliarity with these “products of Western cultural aggression” (*mahsolāt-e-tahājom-e-farhangi-e-gharb*) among the youth, as he mockingly called imitating the state’s clichéd phrases. Either way, as my interactions with many other young friends during my research in Iran, here as well, I was driven into the game until its humorous secret was revealed. The following passage illustrates the manner of this revelation through a “dialogic” translation of which I became an “involuntary participant.”

S: What do you mean, it won’t benefit you?

P: I’m telling you it won’t; it won’t, cause I’m straight.³

S: Oh, come on, one of your games, again? Please, don’t play with me. Tell me what you mean.

P: Wow, you don’t really understand? You are a real I.Q.⁴ How could you not know what it means to be straight? It’s English; it comes from your world and you want me to translate it for you? Ok. It simply means that I am not gay. Did it sink in?⁵

³ He used the term in English, “straight.”

⁴ “I.Q.” is also one of those new but common terms among the youth that is used to suggest stupidity. When someone does not get a joke, or something subtle, she or he is called I.Q., to suggest that the person’s level of I.Q. is low. This notion itself has to do with a great tension within Iran about children’s I.Q. for it is considered to be essential to pass the university entrance exam which nowadays, for urban Iranians, is one of the most critical issues. The question of higher I.Q. based on which students are sent to the gifted or other schools is a source of conflict even among family members.

⁵ The term he used was “oftād?” (did it fall?), which is a shortened version of “did your coin fall in its hole.” This phrase indicates yet another linguistic twist. It is derived from the act of putting a coin into the hole of a public pay phone. Supposedly those who were not “technology-smart” did not realize that bent coins would not go through the hole and therefore the connection would not be made. This has taken on another meaning now that refers to the inability or slowness in understanding the connotation of a joke or a

S: No, it did not sink in. I know what straight means, but I don't see the relationship between going to see Moharram processions (dasteh) and your sexual orientation.

P. Which means you don't know what "dasteh" and "alam" stand for. You've really become an "outsider" (khāreji).⁶

S: Enough already. Juts tell me what it stands for.

P. Penis.⁷

S. What?

P. Yep! Penis. Haven't you heard girls say let's go and watch dastehs (plural for dasteh) to see which one is bigger, or let's go and pick up (or lift) an "alam" (standard--a phallic shape metal symbol carried by men in religious mourning processions)? What did you think they meant?⁸

subtle statement. In such a case, it is said that the person's coin is not flat and thus does not fall into the hole (go through). The coin here of course stands for the brain that is not sharp enough. So when someone does not get a joke or a subtle phrase right away, he or she is said to have a "do zāri-e-kaj" (a bent two Riyal coin). The phrase "oftād?" is a shortened version which is used to invoke this entire story of a failed communication, a metaphor to allude to the incapacity of someone's brain to grasp an idea.

⁶ The term "Khāreji" has culturally come to mean not just any outsider but often a Westerner and, when mockingly used, as in this case, implies a higher class for the Westerners and a mockery of the one who is assumed to be one but is not.

⁷ That he uses the term "penis" in English has also become a common practice, especially among the youth. It seems to be a way to utter obscenities by expanding the boundaries of language while at the same time enacting a "classy" gesture. Or perhaps this is a way of implying that profanity resides outside of one's own language and culture, invading from the West, as the Islamic Republic often suggests. One could foresee that the Persian and Arabic words might also become metaphors for violence in the US since, for many western governments, violence has become synonymous with Islam.

⁸ Later in the dissertation we will see that this reliance on twisting customary norms out of their ordinary space is a common practice of social behavior and the language and jokes of the Iranian youth today. That women are to go and watch "dastehs" and that dastehs are often compared to one another in size, passion, religious hymns and such other religious performance is a customary fact. But that dasteh comes to mean penis, the sizes of which women compare, is an indication of the aptness of the youth's play with language.



Men and “alams” in Poyān’s school town

From Religious Public Mourning to Sexual Voyeurism

Penis!⁹ This word that suddenly appeared in English and so out of place, instantly banished my residual drowsiness. One would have expected that, after more than a year in Iran in 2003-2004 and in 2005, and after having been surprised, time and again, by jokes which targeted nearly every sacred or taboo issue in the society, I would no longer be startled by these humorous tricks to which I had so often been exposed during my stay in Iran. Even more than before, I had come to appreciate the talent with which Iranians, especially the youth, so radically bent the language, symbols, and metaphors against their

⁹ A person of his background and class of my generation would have almost never used that term especially in a conversation with a member of the opposite sex, not to mention with someone of a different generation. But during my stay in Iran, in the last few years, I had had abundant occasion to be exposed to many more open conversations about more graphically sexual matters than the name of a sexual organ.

conventional usages.¹⁰ This manner of dropping English or Āzarian words while speaking Farsi, added more spice to these games of ambiguities. Yet, somehow, every encounter with these “punch lines” felt like a shock of the uncanny.¹¹

There seemed to be something so unsettlingly unexpected yet anticipated in them that even in their repetition they almost always affected me as if for the first time. This phone conversation was no exception. I knew Poyān’s sense of humor and his manner of playing with words, which often contained some kind of sexual connotation. I was also very much familiar with the erotic hints that are common features of Sufi poetry in Iranian literature. I was, nevertheless, dumbfounded by the bluntness with which this linguistic endeavor turned a medium of religious commemoration into a sexual signifier, in this case, to an object of erotic voyeurism.¹² For most Iranians, there is nothing unusual about the phrase, “let’s go and see dastehs” (mourning processions); in fact, one might frequently hear it from women during Moharram. But it is not normal for a woman to say: “Let’s go lift (or pick up) an `alam,” (berim `alam boland konim), for

¹⁰ I was of course mindful of Victor Turner’s (1967) idea about the multivocal and polysemic quality of symbols. This however did not prepare me for the appearance of such drastic subversion.

¹¹ In an intriguing passage, Freud describes this sense of uncanny less as a shock of the unexpected than of the unexpected doubling and repetition. He writes, “The subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self. And finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations” (1997: 210). Freud describes his own experience with the uncanny in his return to the same brothel house again and again during a walk in the city. The sense of shock that I felt upon encountering these sacrilegious jokes resembled Freud’s experience. In the boundary that our modern mind draws between religion and sexuality lie the unexpected and yet always already anticipated possibility of their doubling. While each encounter with these jokes disrupts their boundary, the anticipation for and the repetition of such occurrences are ever-present.

¹² For example, in *Mansnavi*, Molavai offers a graphic description of a copulation of a woman with a donkey which leads to her death due to the large size of the donkey’s penis. Yet, if Molavi employs sexual metaphor to make his religious, moral and ethical point accessible to his readers, Poyān turns religious symbols into sexual objects.

“traditionally” women’s roles have been to watch and mourn the processions while men march in “dastehs” and carry “`alams.”

Yet, women’s increasingly active participation in modern Islamic Movements,¹³ which have often come about by breaking normative gender roles, renders imagining such a phrase not entirely unlikely. It is quite possible—considering the spirit of the time—that some women would be willing to take part in this or other previously male-specific religious practices.¹⁴ In fact, while walking by a “dastehs,” during Muharram of 2004, I came across a few “pious” women who beat their chests.¹⁵ Although they were not marching along with men in “dasteh,” merely standing aside and beating their chests was already an unconventional practice. It would not have therefore been too far fetched to assume that the phrase “let’s go and pick up an `alam” was an expression of the new desire and attitude of some women to assert a more active role for themselves in religious domains than that which has been assigned in male dominated societies.

It is also true that, during Muhrram in 2004 and 2005, I repeatedly saw some young men and women who used these processions to check each other out, to flirt, to exchange phone numbers and to make rendezvous with one another. Evidently, many young men lifted `alams¹⁶ to show off their muscles under tight shirts as many young women stood alongside or walked by these “dastehs,” dressed and made up as though for

¹³ I was, in fact, rather surprised at how much women’s roles in funerals and mourning processions had changed when I had to live through the experience of my father’s death during my research in Iran.

¹⁴ Women in Iran also now work as fire fighters and police officers and of course as wardens and security guards.

¹⁵ This practice used to be considered “harām” (religiously unsanctioned) for women, supposedly because of their breasts and breastfeeding.

¹⁶ The fact that the shape of these “`alams” has changed from one or two branches to several of them and thus requires more younger men to carry them demarcates the two opposite and interrelated movements between the proliferation of religious symbols under the Islamic Republic and the growth of cynical attitudes toward this exaggeration.

a party. In retrospect, as if reading a traumatic event backward, one could have in fact anticipated the emergence of this profane apparition that had, like a “jinn,” invaded the body of symbols of a significant religious mourning procession. And yet, that this could have been anticipated does not make the encounter less surprising or unexpected. A huge leap in values must be taken for these religious signifiers to embody sexual organs; it appeared that for youngsters like Poyān, this bridge had already been crossed.

The transpiration of this erotic specter in the body of a religious symbol unravels a wider and deeper transgression than women’s greater participation in the religious terrain. This playful invasion aims to transform the image of young, especially middle class, urban Iranian women from being the objects of the male gaze into voyeurs who also look at men as sexual objects. It posits women in a different relation to power and sexuality where they too come to “select” and “pick up” men for sexual pleasure. The penetration of sexual imagery into this commemoration ritual also indicates the gravity of transgression from social and religious norms. In one stroke, a twofold subversion is undertaken: the sacred is eroticized and desacralized and gender roles are inverted both in religious and in sexual relations. There is also an element of economy behind all these transmissions and inversions, which is anchored in the shared potential of an object—a commodity, a symbol, or a word—to “be made to stand for another.” This is, according to Morris, “an inherent potential of language to become an economy, a matter of exchanging” (2000: 29).

This erosion of the boundaries between religiosity and sexuality, which is by no means an exceptional or unprecedented occurrence, insinuates yet another provocative

maneuver. It reveals and comments on the nature of our world as “world-commodity”¹⁷ and “world-picture”¹⁸--a world in which everything, including religion and sexuality, have turned into and are visualized as representational commodities; where fantasies, which are now themselves commodities, lead to the production of commodities and more fantasies-commodities. In this world of images seeing produces desire and fantasy, while fantasy and desire engender socio-historically specific eyes for seeing. The kinds of sexual or religious fantasies that prevail are largely derived from certain domestic and global interrelations and dynamics of the market economy, in which neither market nor economy are bounded by their conventional meanings and boundaries. The capital of this economy includes cultural and linguistic assets, memories, ethical and moral values, and regimes of truth that are desirable or can engender desire in a particular world-market. That the Islamic Republic has claimed the guardianship of Faith as its essential task, thereby asserting its hegemonic power over people’s desires and fantasies, explains both the erection and the collapsing of the boundaries of religiosity and sexuality in post-revolutionary Iran and the great significance that this collapse entails.¹⁹ I find the

¹⁷ Marx defines commodity as, “in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another.” Marx suggests that it “makes no difference” whether such wants “spring from the stomach or from fancy.” (1978: 303). In fact we now know well that fantasies are as much the productions of wants that wants are produced by fantasies. Of the relation of the desire and want Marx cites Nicholas Barbon (1696) stating that: “Desire implies want; it is the appetite of the mind, and as natural as hunger to the body...The greatest number (of things) have their value from supplying the wants of the mind” (cited in Tucker: 1978). Of course, the basic quality of commodity is to be exchanged and to be produced through the expression of excess. In the world commodity we nowadays live, this can be expanded both to religious and sexual desires and their commodity forms.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger defines world picture as a “picture of the world” as “something that does not mean only that what it is, is set before us, is represented to us, in general, but that what is stands before us—in all that belongs to it and all that stands together in it—as a system” (1977: 129) is a picture.

¹⁹ Lila Abu-Lughod highlights this relationship between national projects and their connection to gender relations and sexuality, in the larger context of power and subjugation. In an opposite direction from Poyān’s sexual language, she mentions how Afsaneh Najmabadi has shown that under the Shah, “as Iranian women became more educated and gained entrance to a public world that placed them in heterosocial space, their language was stripped of a rich sexual explicitness and they strove to produce their unveiled bodies as disciplined and chaste” (Abu-Lughod, 1998: 9). In her 1993 article, “Veiled Discourse-Unveiled

following passage provides an apt commentary on authoritative claims to the guardianship, if not ownership, of language and the unpredictable and uncontrollable life that it comes to live despite that authority.

Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells (Marx, Engels, 1998: 57).

Misplaced Subjectivities

But what does all this have to do with my research, which is about discourses of self-sacrifice and martyrdom in post-revolutionary Iran? How does it relate to the discriminatory recognition of the self-sacrifice of “state” and “dissident martyrs” and their families’ experiences of, and struggles against, loss, mourning, commemoration, and so on?²⁰ I would simply suggest that the subversive attitudes towards religious symbols have everything to do with the manner in which the state has seemingly coalesced the mytho-historical events of “original Shi`ism” into the recent history of Iran. Indeed, the very invocation of these “old” histories was compelled by the needs and desires of the present. Particular notions and practices of sacrifice emerged or were summoned from a long gone past and were attuned and a response to, modern views of religiosity, state, subjectivity, submission and so on. By the same token, the discrepant

Bodies,” in *Feminist Studies*, Najmabadi suggests that Iranian women’s entry into the heterosocial public space coincided with the “sanitization” of their language from sexual remarks.

²⁰ Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to two groups of the dead as martyrs, as they are titled by their families and friends. Of those who were killed for the state, either in the external war with Iraq or in the internal conflicts, and are officially recognized as martyrs by the state, I speak either as state or as official martyrs. As for the opponents of the regime, who were killed by the state as “the corrupted on earth” (*mofsed-e-fel-arż*), I refer to them as dissident or unofficial martyrs. I of course realize that these categories are reductive and ignore the much more complex realities, overlaps, and confusion within and between these groups but these terms and categories have become our means of communicating our ideas.

ways in which the self-sacrifices of different groups of Iranians and their subsequent experiences have been written into or erased from the pages of the official history are manifestations of different relations to the state's hegemonic power, rather than repetitions or continuations of the "original" Shi'i history as the Iranian state would like us to believe.²¹

In this dissertation, I argue that particular collective memories, linguistic and conceptual metaphors, and religious, cultural, and literary symbols, have been, and continue to be, indispensable to the history of modern Iran.²² I suggest that the "performative charisma" (Csordas 1997) of the Islamic revolutionary leaders in aptly and innovatively appropriating and manipulating these enduring memories, metaphors, and symbols, especially those concerning self-sacrifice and martyrdom, was vital to the victory of the Revolution and the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran.²³ I also show that these elements are, at the same time, the very means with which individuals now transgress hegemonic discourses, which are (ironically?) embodied in the state or some religious authorities.

Throughout this dissertation, as we accompany people in and out of the labyrinth of their dreams, struggles, and disappointments, we come to acknowledge Marx's

²¹ Petar Ramadanovic writes about the "struggle for memory" as "a political struggle" that he suggests "is waged against the winners, that is, conquerors who control history, and, by manipulating the collective memory, dictate the collective's identity, 2001:24).

²² In her book *Being Modern in Iran*, Fariba Adelkhah writes: "The diversification of Iranian society is not only political, socio-economic or geographical. It is also historical and cultural in nature, as the philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush recalls when he speaks of 'three cultures.' The country relates just as much to its pre-Islamic past and its borrowing from the West as to Islam" (2000: 178). While recognizing diversities in Iranian history, it is as crucial to realize that they are not in isolation from, or untouched by, one another. The pre-Islamic culture we construct today is filtered through our modern discourses, as the Islam itself, as a discursive tradition, is historically produced and shaped Iranian modernity.

²³ Distinguishing his definition of charisma from that of Max Weber, Thomas Csordas writes: "I propose that charisma is a self process the locus of which is not the personality of a charismatic leader but the rhetorical resources mobilized among participants in ritual performance" (1997: xviii).

statement that “people make their own history but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited” (Marx, 2002: 19). In their endeavors to create a more desirable place in world-history and the disillusionment that often follows, we also recognize, in Hamid Dabashi’s words, a “sense of misplaced memory” and a relation to a place to which “one [does] not really belong” (2007: 5). I believe that such dissatisfaction with Iranians’ placement, or in fact misplacement, in the world had a great deal to do with the massive movement against the Shah, both in the early 1950s and in the late 1970s. It is noteworthy to mention that both the 1950s uprising and the 1979 Revolution targeted the Shah and the Imperialists’ dominance—British and American, respectively—to which he had consented. In the 1950s, Mohammad Mosaddegh, a member of the National Front Party, gained popularity because of his attempt to end British control over the Iranian oil industry.²⁴

²⁴ In a timely article, titled “Orientalism Enters the Cold War,” which reminds one of the way history keeps repeating itself while each repetition ends up being more a tragedy than a farce, Cyrus Schayegh writes: “In July 29, 1951, three months after the beginning of Mohammed Mosaddeq’s premiership in Iran, the New York Times (NYT) published a long article on Iranian nationalism and the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) entitled “Moral for Iran: Lion or Mouse?” The writer, T.H. Vail Motter, explained that the cause of the present “accumulation of resentments, ancient and modern, plain, fancy and fanciful (...) turn (ing) upon a single target - oil” of the Iranians are to be found in their perception of repeated violations of their sovereignty, last during World War Two by the Allied occupation for which “in Iranian eyes, the price was exorbitant and the victory was one of words (...) so long as the most vital factor in the post-war economy remained foreign.” Admitting that “[I]t will not do (...) to overlook the universal sense of injustice Iranians feel at what they regard as the contradictions between the West’s words and its deeds,” Motter immediately added that “the Iranian Government’s specific case against the British oil company is by all means altogether unreasonable”, because Iran’s “lack of adequate technical manpower” renders nationalized oil-production futile.” Schayegh goes on to cite the author of the New York Times’ article in answering his own question about the logic behind Iranians’ “unreasonable” resentment towards Britain which of course is explained by “the mood of the people whipped up by a combination of interested forces ranging from Moslem leaders to Communist stooges who know well to exploit popular resentment against foreigners.” The mood of Iranian people, he immediately concludes, is not an “analytic but emotional.” That Iranians do not distinguish “the difference between fantasy and fact.” Is there any surprise in the words that appear in the article characterizes Iranians’ uprising as “surcharged emotions” and “of course very childish” and, what is more, that “in the Western nations which have learned the lessons of “the calamitous consequences of exaggerated nationalism”.... such “extreme nationalism is regarded as the adolescence of nations from which they grow to adulthood.” But somehow, according to

The fact that people's uprising in support of nationalization of the Iranian oil industry, which had forced the Shah to exile and brought Mosaddegh to power, was defeated by the CIA organized and sponsored Coup d'état was a critical turning point in Iranian history. The forced reinstatement of the regime of the Shah—now highly armed with American weapons—further fortified people's perception of the Shah as the puppet of the US. Not surprisingly, therefore, the revolutionary movement of the late 1970s was ignited by a combination of Iranians' disillusionment with the state of affairs in Iran and with their position in the world, particularly the role of the US in Iran. No need to mention therefore that Khomeini's most popular speeches were those that articulated his objection to the country's dependency on the West, particularly on the US.²⁵

The perception of the dependence of the Iranian state on US Imperialism had at least two significant implications. On the one hand, this perception attributed an omnipotent quality to the Shah's Regime, which made resistance to it appear extremely risky, if not entirely futile.²⁶ Hence, Khomeini's characterization of the 1979 Revolution as "God's miracle" (m`ojeze-ye-elāhi) was more than a religious expression. It also articulated the common belief about the unlikelihood of victory over the Shah's Regime which would necessitate the defeat of the US or at least its ability to support the Shah.

these Orientalists, instead of growing to adulthood [when the CIA coup defeated their movement and brought the Shah back to power] they regressed to the long gone past, to "fundamentalism," or so our Orientalists scholars and politicians would like us to believe (in JUSUR, 2004).

²⁵ In fact, it is interesting to remind the reader that copies of Khomeini's book, "The Islamic Government" were immediately removed from bookstores, by his own supporters, in mid 1970s. As the words of mouth had it then, the idea was considered too radical, even non-Shi'i interpretation. At the time, many clergy members believed that they should not participate in governing a state.

²⁶ It was due to this desperate situation after the defeat of the 1953 movement against the Shah that the very notion of "small and large engine" was developed by Ma'soud Ahmadzadeh and Amir Parviz Poyān. This theory was a response to the perception of the Shah's Regime as omnipotent. These Marxist militant leaders suggested that in order to shake the Regime's image of omnipotence, the "small revolutionary engine," which referred to the revolutionary guerrillas needed to take action and show people that the regime was not unbreakable so that the large engine, the people, could be mobilized.

On the other hand, this notion of the connection between the Iranian state and the US attributed an extraordinary, nearly supernatural quality to the pioneers of resistance against the Regime. This allowed for the mytho-history of the Karbala Event to be rendered more powerfully and evocatively.²⁷ With the US behind the Shah's Regime, even a mass movement against him could still characterize itself as a minority of righteous and courageous people against a strong army of the oppressors. Any act of resistance to the Shah, therefore, was considered a self-sacrificing act.²⁸ Furthermore, the connection between the US and the Iranian Regime was one of the main reasons that, during the Revolution of 1979, class struggle and the struggle for liberty were overshadowed by anti-American, anti-Western, and anti-Shah chants.²⁹

That in the mid 1970s, the notion of "Return to the Self" (*bāz gasht-e-beh khishtan*) that was phrased by Ali Shari'ati, a sociologist and an Islamic Ideologue of the time, would be conjured as a return to the "original past," as if such a return were ever possible, must be deciphered in relation to this nostalgic sense of misplacement in history (1977).³⁰ Within a hegemonic dichotomy that equates the West and a Western way of life with secularism, modernity, and democracy, while religion, tradition, and

²⁷ Karbala Event refers to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the Third Imam of the Shi'i and his companions in the desert of Karbala in seventh Century in the Hands of the Caliph of the Time.

²⁸ The title of the most significant leftist militant organization since the 1960s, "fadaeyian-e-khalgh" (people's self-sacrificers) is an example of this view.

²⁹ There were many such chants as "Down with the US" which always accompanied "Down with the Shah, this American Dog."

³⁰ According to Susan Stewart, nostalgia "is sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience." In this sense, Dabashi's discussion of Iranians' sense of their real place in history as neither here, nor there, in a time that is either in the past or the future, but never here and now, supplements Stewart's view. She also points out that "Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack" (1993:23). One might argue that the power of this surreal "origin" in mobilizing movements lies in this very lack.

fundamentalism are seen as dispositions of the “stagnated” East,³¹ the idea of the “clash of civilizations” its way both to the “West” and the “East.”³² These hegemonic readings of the “world order” and the “order of things” also justify the othering of people within and beyond national borders. People are designated as fit or unfit depending on the way normative subjectivities are defined. Within these imposed norms of belonging to the world order, one might begin to make sense of the contradiction between the active participation of millions of Iranians in overthrowing the Shah’s Regime and the following passage:

Within the span of half a century Iran emerged from semi-medieval slumber and backwardness to become one of the most rapidly modernizing nations in Asia and *by far the strongest power in the Persian Gulf region* (Lenczowski cited by Amuzegar, 1991, 3).³³

As Amuzegar points out, the above passage is found on the dust cover of “a major study whose publication was to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of Iranian development under the Pahlavi dynasty,” which was published in 1976 (Amuzegar: 1991:3). Between this view and that espoused in one of Khomeini’s most famous speeches, in which he warned the Shah of the consequences of further humiliating

³¹ These views are so prevalent that even when it is challenged in the words of, for instance, former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, it is contradicted in the same writing. Note the following two passages both from Khatami’s writings: “If we ask dogmatic believers...what they expect from the revolution, they claim that they want a return to Islamic civilization. We must alert such people that their wishes are anachronistic. The specific thoughts that underpinned Islamic civilization ended with the passing of that civilization. If it had maintained its dynamism, relevance and ability to provide answers to people’s problems, that civilization would have endured” (Khatami, 1997: 26). But then note how Khatami compares the current mode of thinking in Iran to a time in the past in Germany. He writes: “We have to express new ideas with our medieval vocabulary and language. Historically, we are in an era similar to the German ‘Kulture Kritik.’ It is not until we pass the stage that we expect the emergence of a new mode of thinking and new thinkers who can revolutionize our language and also our thoughts. For we can re-read Ibn-Sina [Avrceina] with a western horizon in mind” (ibid).

³² The term has been so commonly used that is nearly absurd to cite Samuel Huntington (1993, 1996).

³³ Italics are in the original text.

Iranians under the “capitulation law which privileges an American dog over the King of Iran,” the gulf is so gigantic that it allowed ample space for such monstrous creatures of “antiquity” as “crusades,” “axis of evils,” and “Jihad against unbelievers” to be once again invoked. As these “old” words are imposed on new elements, the fuel for self-sacrificing acts in Iran too, contrary to Orientalists’ views, are not derived from a pathological obsession with a petrified past. It is rather, the capacity of the modern regimes of truth and knowledge that create such binary oppositions and engender the condition of possibility for the innovative invocation of particular mytho-historical memories, religious or cultural metaphors, and myths.

The 1979 Revolution, “Was it A Tragedy or a Farce?”³⁴

Since 1979, a substantial corpus of scholarly work has been devoted to understanding the roots of the Iranian Revolution, its characteristics and peculiarities, as well as the unpredictably tenuous but resilient regime that was established in its aftermath. Utilized as a case study in “Debating Revolutions” (Keddi: 1995), having led to such suggestions as “anti-explanation” (Kurzman, 2004), and defined as “a revolution for every theory” (Amuzegar, 1991: 16), the Revolution of 1979 has preoccupied and puzzled both academicians and politicians.³⁵ This puzzlement has been expressed both

³⁴ This was the question that I was asked by Professor Claudio Lomnitz, who was the discussant for a paper I presented in Scheps library talk series in April 27, 2007 at Columbia University. The paper was a small part of one of the chapters of this dissertation.

³⁵ Amuzegar explains this phrase, a revolution for every theory, as follows: “Some observers are inclined to argue that the fall of the Iranian monarchy in 1979 was the result of not one revolution but many. It is held, therefore, there was a *political* revolution against autocratic rule which, although age-old and indigenous, had by then become increasingly outmoded and anachronistic. Second, there was an *economic* revolution against perceived inequalities in income and opportunities which, although endemic and invidious, had become far more visible and thus more intensely resented. Third, there was a *social* revolution against a growing stratification in outlook, values, interests, and lifestyle among traditional classes which, while going back to the turn of the century, seemed increasingly more pronounced and foreboding. And finally, there was a *cultural* revolution in the guise of religion, against feared loss of Persian identity and national

by its supporters and its opponents. If for Khomeini, the revolution's victory was "God's miracle" (m`ojezeh-ye-elāhi), for the current "Supreme Religious Leader" (vali-e-faghih), Ali Khameneyee, it felt like a "dream from which [we] did not want to be awakened."³⁶ No less shocked were other clergy members, leftists, nationalists, and the left leaning Islamic Organization, Mojahedin. In fact, even after its victory, for the first few months following the political suppression of the new state's dissidents in 1981 in the increasingly crowded jails, many political inmates, especially those affiliated with Mojahedin, in their own metaphoric expression, "slept with their shoes on." These inmates were not alone in sleeping with "one eye open," to the possibility of their release through a "revolutionary invasion" by "real revolutionary forces;" the Regime itself never imagined growing as old as it has.³⁷

Caught in the dualities of traditional-modern, secularism-religion, freedom-oppression, the West and the opponents of the Regime failed to recognize the resilient interplay of religious, cultural, and sociopolitical elements that intricately bounded the populace and the state together.³⁸ From views that seek "an adequate explanation for the

heritage which, while perhaps unduly exaggerated, had become particularly ominous and intolerable as the regime took on a more avant-guard color" (1991:5).

³⁶ Here, he uses the pronoun "we" in its ambivalent connotation. Such a "we" could be read either as an assertion of power, or a gesture of humility, or both. The first one, the "royal we" was used by the kings and distinguished elites. For them, the "I" was belittling, for they supposedly possessed their subjects thereby their subjectivity was singularly collective. The second one, the "humble we," was used by children, peasants, or other often rural lower class individuals, for, presumably, they did not possess individual subjectivity but were a mere member of a collective, the king's or the landlords' subjects.

³⁷ Sleeping with "one-eye open," and "with our shoes on" was expressed by many of the inmates who were jailed in the early 80s before the crushing of the organization and the consolidation of the Regime forced them to accept their organization's defeat. On the other hand, Sadegh Khalkhali, who is famous for his prompt decision in sentencing the opponents of the Islamic Republic to death is known to have said that "we are not as stupid as the Shah. We won't leave the country behind for our opponents. If we are forced to leave, we will make sure that we leave a ruin behind."

³⁸ The debates about Iranian society under the Islamic Republic have often been reduced to arguments such as whether or not Iranians' relationship to martyrdom is rational; is the Iranian state backward or modern? Are women in Iran totally oppressed or has their situation improved under the Islamic Republic? Is the

Iranian Revolution ...through a clinical inference” (Swenson: 1985: 128)³⁹ and which perceive “Iranians’ fervor for Karbala and martyrdom” as “narcissistic,” to the notion of Shi`ism’s inherent nature of protest (Kramer: 1987) to those leftists who denied that there had even been a revolution, the Revolution remained a curiously complex and unresolved phenomenon.⁴⁰ The election of Mahmood Ahmadinezhad, a former war veteran, to the presidency in August 2005, while many Iranians seemed to be disillusioned with the behavior of the revolutionary guards, augmented this mystifying puzzle.

On the other hand, the story of the conditions and struggles that led to the Revolution of 1979 has often been told, by scholars and official histories alike, as a linear, progressive growth of the religious leaders’ role and popularity, the inevitability, and somewhat predictable outcome of an “Islamic Revolution.” Here, I will not and cannot go into the details of how a movement that initially seemed to emerge from the poor suburbs of Tehran in response to the destruction of their shanty towns by the state, was subsequently taken up by mainly leftist leaning university students, and followed by the secular intellectuals’ poetry reading nights at the Goethe Institute led to an “Islamic movement.” The official history, on the other hand, links the instigation of the revolutionary movement to an article critical of Khomeini published in a state newspaper, *Ettel’aat*, which led to a massive demonstration in Qom. This version has been asserted

Iranian youth pro-Islamic or pro-Western? Is Islam compatible with democracy, feminism, or human rights?

³⁹ In her essay, “Martyrdom: Mytho-Cathexis and Mobilization of the Masses in the Iranian Revolution,” in *Ethos*. 1985. v. 13 Issue 2 (Summer) pp. 121-149, Jill Diane Swenson argues that the Iranians’ fervor for Karbala and martyrdom is a narcissistic case that should be discussed in clinical terms.

⁴⁰ Several leftist organizations, which opposed the Islamic Republic from the outset, referred to the events of 1979 as uprising (ghiyām). They argued that the real revolution did not happen because the Islamists stopped it by taking power and blocking it from reaching its promises.

not merely by selective dismissal of other realities, but through various forms of silencing that, as Michel-Rolph Truillot (1995) argues, characterizes the writing of any history.

Yet, both the necessity and the very possibility of reaching the most widely shared and evocative collective memory of Iranians resided not in the inherent nature of protest in Shi'ism, and not necessarily in Qom as the mainland of the Iranian clergy, but rather in the dissatisfaction with and anxiety about the connection between the Shah's power and the US. But both the Western version and the official history offered by the Iranian state have told the story of the Revolution, even as it was taking place, in relation to the "original" Shi'i history. A long leap was made to link this "origin" to Khomeini's role in the religious students' uprising in Qom in 1962 and to his exile. The stories of the Prophet's exile, which relate his decision to migrate from Mecca, his hometown, to Madinah in order to escape the unbelievers' harassment, and the stories of the twelfth Imam's occultation, also to avoid the risk posed to his life by his enemies, were invoked by his supporters to create a deeper meaning and a more emotionally invested purchase for Khomeini's forced exile. That this danger stemmed from the "American Regime of the Shah" made it so much easier to appeal to those original narratives and portray any opposition to this movement as a "war against God" (*mohārebeh bā khodā*).

In reality, the polyvocal and multidimensional nature of these collective memories were illustrated by the way religious rituals, poetry, and performing arts were fused to portray the expulsion of the Shah as the departure of the "monster" (*div*) and the return of Khomeini from exile as the arrival of "angel" (*fereshteh*).⁴¹ It was not unusual to come across portrayals in which historical characters from different periods converged in a

⁴¹ The lyrics were taken from a well known poem by Hafiz, a well known 14th century Persian Poet.

single narrative, as in reality millions of Iranians were united around a single goal, overthrowing the Shah, notwithstanding their different dreams for the future. Mary Steedly writes that voices are “always multiple, fragmented, interrupted, possessed by the memories of other people’s experiences,” and I add that the same is true of the memories which speak through those voices (1993:22). Indeed, as Steedly suggests, the “transfer of historical experience—in names, monuments, genealogies, in collective fantasy and in regulated social intercourse of everyday life; in law, property, and desire; in stories inhaled with the common air of shared place or time—is the movement through which subjectivity is produced” (1993: 22). And surely, the subjectivities that were produced during the Revolution of 1979 were just as exceptionally complex and multiplied.

Yet, all and all, in discussions of the Revolution of 1979, little has been said about the delicate and innovative mechanisms and means by which modern regimes of power and knowledge utilized the language, metaphors, symbols and other signifiers that are deeply engraved in Iranians’ collective memory. Instead, the summoning of the “old” metaphors and religious or mytho-historical characters were either seen as anachronistic and therefore doomed to fail or as a mere sham of which people were to soon become aware. As Talal Asad (1996, SEHR, V. 5), in an interview with Saba Mahood, remarks: “Many writers describe the [Islamic] movements in Iran and Egypt as only partly modern and suggest that it is their mixing of tradition and modernity that accounts for their “pathological” character. This kind of description,” in Asad’s words, “paints Islamic movements as being somehow inauthentically traditional on the assumption that ‘real tradition’ is unchanging, repetitive, and non-rational” (1996). These views find illustration, as Mehrzad Boroujerdi asserts, in the way “the intellectual and political

landscape of Iran over the last two decades [now almost three decades] have often been characterized as anachronistic, bewildering, enigmatic, incongruent, intricate, ironic, multidimensional, paradoxical, permutable, recondite, serendipitous, and unpredictable” (2001: 13).⁴²

To make sense of their “bewilderment,” most scholars and politicians perceive the Iranian Revolution either as a regression to “tradition,” wherein tradition is seen as unchanging, or have undermined the agentive role of people in their own history and explained the Islamic Revolution as an outcome of the trickery of the clergy and the “false consciousness” of the people. Manipulation for these scholars and for opponents of the Regime takes on a different meaning from the one I have deployed in this dissertation. Their usage of this term implies the fooling and tricking of a naïve and ignorant populace, whereas I have utilized “manipulation” to refer to any representation and discursive reading, which of course might also include straightforward deception. There is yet another, though related, binary opposition that involves the 1979 Revolution which has to do with the role of Shi`ism and its discourse of martyrdom, particularly the Karbala Event, in the Revolution. Either the entire Revolution is read as having come about because of the inherent potential of Shi`ism for protest and martyrdom, or the

⁴² Interestingly in the very passage in which Boroujerdi attempts to explain what should be understood about post-revolutionary Iran, his own suggestions come to contradict one another. To answer why these descriptions have been used for the post-revolutionary landscape of Iran, he proposes “the following points: (a) to understand the subtlety, specifically, and the contradictory intellectual heritage of contemporary Iran, one needs to develop an ear for the whisperings of irony and eye for the nuances of paradox which has baptized Iran’s revolution over the last two decades; (b) the profound cultural, economic, and social transformations of the post-revolution and multidimensionality previously unimaginable—consideration of this fact should remind us not to perpetuate the analytical error of the revolution’s first decade by attributing the monumental political transformation that have taken place to any leader’s words or deeds; and (c) since coming to power in 1979, the clerical establishment and Shii jurisprudence have been ambushed by politics and entrapped in the epistemological labyrinth of modernity” (2001: 13). Note his last proposition. He does not see the clerical establishment as responding to and themselves living within their own “tradition of modernity,” in Asad’s sense, but as “entrapped in its labyrinth.”

resilient dynamic of its metaphoric events are portrayed as superficial and inauthentic invocations.⁴³

Revolution and Metaphors

I propose a different notion of the relationship between Shi`ism and Revolution, and a different understanding of the Karbala Event. Following Asad and other scholars of Islamic modernity (Asad, 1986, 1993, 2003; Hirschkind, 2001, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006; Mahmood, 2001, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2006; Messick, 1993, 1995, 1998, 2001; Mitchell, 1991, 2000, 2002; and others), I conjure up Islam and therefore Shi`ism—or any religious belief for that matter—as a discursive tradition that, while connected to the past, is historically specific and, as any discursive reading, is read in, and in relation to, the present. It is precisely in the moment of transition and in being constantly pushed towards the future that a historically living and fluid interpretation of Shi`ism looks back and discovers or reinvents connections between its “origin” and a modern Revolution—doesn’t “secularism” constantly look back at its “origin,” and thereby recreate itself?”

I, therefore, do not concern myself with the issue of authenticity of the Islamic Republic in relation to the “original” history of Shi`ism; nor do I dismiss the reality of the intense anxiety that this claim to originality provokes among its ideologues and the limitation and possibilities that it entails. Both the anxiety about and the very attempt to remain connected to or disconnected from a particular past are the outcomes of specific ideological, sociopolitical, and historical modes of subjectivity rooted in the present. I

⁴³ This is also true of the nature of the Revolution: whether it is Islamic or whether Islam is a mere sham has been an ongoing preoccupation. There is an assumption that since Khomeini had once said, “Economy is a donkey,” he did not understand anything about the realities of the modern world and its market economy, and that he was a backward, fanatic Mulla, (a derogatory term for the clergy members). On the other hand, there were constant efforts to prove that the clergy or other apparently devout Muslims were mere charlatans who were hiding behind a religious mask to gain power and wealth. Constant rumors and speculations revolve around the amount of money in foreign banks that certain clergy members have.

also do not believe that the complexity of the Revolution of 1979 is reducible to a tragedy or farce. That the very notion of return always already entails both tragedy and farce within, does not take away the reality of the revolutionary experience for those who lived through or died for it.

To do away with predominantly “either-or” approaches about the role of religious-cultural metaphors in modern Iran, I introduce a new conceptualization of these particular metaphors and of their relationship to the Revolution and to the post-revolutionary Iran. But first I should mention that, as many scholars suggest, metaphors simultaneously enable and limit our communication and thought processes. Our language and thoughts are immersed in and dependent on metaphors. Franz Kafka expresses frustration and despair because of his dependency on metaphors in his writing (1988).⁴⁴ To indicate the gravity of this dependence, he uses the metaphor of the death of two children who suffocate in the trunk of a car because there is no caretaker present to open the truck and let them out. Perhaps no less vital was the role of particular linguistic and conceptual metaphors for the Revolutionary movement in Iran.

I use the terms “metaphoric discourses” and “discursive metaphors” to imply and emphasize the complexity, resilience, and in-flexibility of specific memories and metaphors in Iranian society and in the 1979 Revolution. By “metaphoric discourses,” I

⁴⁴Kafka writes: “Metaphors are one among many things which make me despair of writing. Writing’s lack of independence of the world, its dependence on the maid who tends the fire, on the cat warming itself by the stove; it is even dependent on the poor old human being warming himself by the stove. All these are independent activities ruled by their own laws; only writing is helpless, cannot live in itself, is a joke and a despair.” To emphasize the gravity of this dependence, suddenly he writes as if in a news column of a newspaper: “Two children, alone in their house, climbed into a large trunk; the cover slammed shut, they could not open it, and suffocated” (1988). For George Lakoff, metaphor is pervasive not merely in our language but also as a concept in our thoughts (*Metaphors We Live By*, 1980, p. 1; *More Than Cool Reason*, 1989, p. 2). Rather than simple interaction between two words, conceptual metaphors, from this point of view, are an interaction between concepts or schemas, between two domains, which Lakoff refers to as the domains of source and target.

am referring to those discourses that come to stand for something else, either linguistically or conceptually. I consider Karbala narrative a metaphoric discourse. Like any discourse, invocations of Karbala are bound to an authoritative speech-text that is constantly read and reproduced, always in connection to its “original text.” Through speech, performance, and narration, Karbala turns into a historically living and enduring event. It is “metaphoric” for it has come to stand, for instance, for martyrdom, struggle against oppression, mourning, and so on. It became a metaphor for the Iranian Revolution and not that long later for the Iran-Iraq War; yet as a discourse, its “original story” regulated and channeled the language and symbols of the Revolution and the post-revolutionary Iran.

Echoing Asad’s “discursive tradition,” I also suggest the term “discursive metaphor” to refer to the kinds of metaphors that carry a dogma within them and thus are subjected to authoritative and transgressive readings as is any discursive phenomenon. I suggest that *shabih khāni* (the religious reenactment of the Karbala Event) is a pertinent example of a discursive metaphor. I employ *shabih khāni* both as an annual religious commemorative reenactment of Karbala Event and as a metaphor. As a religious embodied practice, *shabih khāni*, which literally means reading, reciting, or singing similar ⁴⁵ is a semi-dramatic annual reenactment of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the third Shi’i Imam, and his companions in the desert of Karbala event which occurred in the seventh century in the hands of the troops of Yazid, the Caliph of the time. Its title

⁴⁵ In Farsi the word “khāndan” could mean all the three words in English, “reading, reciting, even singing.” Although “deklameh kardan” or “gharāat kardan” are formal translations for reciting, “khāndan” (reading) can also mean and, in fact, is normally used to mean reciting. Similarly, though “āvāz khāndan” is a more exact translation for singing, “khāndan” is also often employed to refer to singing.

suggests that it will only attempt to offer an interpretation of the event rather than trying to closely mimic the original event or characters.⁴⁶

As a religious reenactment, *shabih khāni* has permeated every aspect of Iran's cultures and languages. It claims to tell the same story of the Karbala Event, but it creates a new event in and of itself each time it is reenacted and depends on a wide range of factors including, but not limited to, time, place, class, sponsorship, and the skill of the performers.⁴⁷ *Shabih khāni*'s persistence over time—it has been performed at least since Safavid dynasty—indexes its powerful potential to incorporate changes while appearing the same. Its constant retelling of the Karbala narrative offers a venue for us to explore critical questions about memory, language, translation, and representation. While the mourning or commemorative aspects of this event are inseparable from it, the themes that are highlighted differ from one theatrical performance to another.

As *shabih khāni* is multidimensional and diverse and often exceeds its assumed limits, my utilization of it in this dissertation also appropriates its multifarious capacities and moves beyond its conventional delineation. I have used *shabih khāni* as a metaphor to speak of the transgressive acts which occur within a dominant structure. I have also used the intrinsic tension between *shabih khāni* and the dominant Islamic dogma to explore the question of origins and representation in relation to the Islamic Republic's claim to divinity and its attempts at self-preservation. I show how the Islamic Republic simultaneously aspires to get close to the original by imitating it while claiming to be

⁴⁶ For a detailed discussion of the inherent tension concerning these issues see Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (1993).

⁴⁷ In his last essay "Discourse in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Mikhail Bakhtin points out that "[f]orm and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon-social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning" (2000, 259). As a social phenomenon, the relationship of discourse to power is indispensable.

original itself. In this sense, the reader might find my portrayal of the relationship between Khomeini and the state somewhat confusing. I argue that this ambiguity has been an essential aspect of the Islamic Republic for it allows the state both to claim legitimacy and monopolize violence while leaving Khomeini's figure untouched as a pure origin to which the state might always appeal to "redeem" its legitimacy and to exclude the "out of line" fractions within. Khomeini was written as central to this new *shabih khāni*, in relation to him the stories of others were written, as has Imam Hussein's role been for *shabih khāni*. As a reenactment of the Karbala narrative, *shabih khāni* is associated with and limited by the story of Karbala and its religious characteristics. It stands for the Karbala Event but never becomes it. Like words, it always implies an absence of the real, and thus is always metaphorical and representational; and, like language, it is intertwined with loss and mourning.

As a discursive phenomenon, *shabih khāni* is deemed to diverge and multiply in innovative interpretations. But it is also restrained by authoritative narratives, as any performance. If it reads the Karbala Event as resistance to injustice—which has not always been the highlight of all the readings—it offers its own notion of resistance. As a discursive metaphor, it is evoked and conjured anew in other historical and conceptual contexts. In fact, during the Revolution of 1979, especially in Tabriz or other towns in Azerbaijan Province, Moharram mourning processions and *shabih khāni*, in particular, were performed as if part of the Revolutionary movement. Similarly, revolutionary chants and acts themselves imitated *shabih khāni* and Moharram's mourning procession, as if they were reenactments. The great potential and intricacy of this performative metaphor allowed religious leaders, both during the Revolution and afterwards, to offer

their own innovative language and metaphors, while attempting to impose and construct them as original and as the only true readings.

I should however clarify two critical points about my suggested terms, “discursive metaphors” and “metaphoric discourses.” Firstly, I want to emphasize two possible problems arising from these notions which are related to our understanding of the terms discursive and creative reading. There is, on the one hand, the problem of the loss of balance by putting more weight either on the authoritative or on the creative aspect of discourses. This loss of balance coincides with—if it does not result from—yet another issue: the assumption that the two “sides” are unrelated to and stand in opposition to one another. We often lose sight of the fact that the very restraints of authoritative texts and structures channel and inspire our creativity. On the other end of the spectrum, we sometimes take such little note of authoritative power and their grave impact on the formation of our subjectivities that it appears as though we live in the world as utterly free, autonomous, subjects-artists.⁴⁸

It thus makes little sense, why we voluntarily choose to live in servitude. It also remains baffling that, for instance, under the Islamic Republic where the state considers itself responsible for the fate of its citizens’ life and afterlife, religious symbols turn into sexual metaphors, as we noticed in the opening of this introduction. But then the question one might pose is how does the Islamic Republic survive such significant subversions? Even more importantly, if such subversions are so freely possible, why do they primarily occur in jokes? Is it merely a matter of taste that these transgressions take

⁴⁸ For an eloquent reading about the dialectical relationship between restraints of the world systems and agentive subjectivities see Asad’s *Genealogy of Religion* (1993) on his discussion of Marx’s statement “people make their own history,” and the way it has sometimes been read as if it this making of history occurred by entirely free subjects and outside of those “circumstances” which Marx emphasized.

the form of humor? The first challenge, therefore, in regard to these terms is to be conscious that the very theoretical structures we build do not confine us within them, the very terms we invent to challenge simplified notions do not come back to haunt us. Yet, as it was with the Revolution and as it is with the everyday transgressions in Iran, the very inspiration for change comes to hold on to, and at least partially recreate, the “old.”

History, Language, and Memory

The root of the problem in which people perceive themselves as either under restraint or freely creative does not so much lie in the shortcomings of our theories, as in the way we tend to reduce the complexities of the concepts with which we think and convey our views. Aside from all the other factors—on top of which stands the question of power—this swinging in between or falling on one or the other side originates from the inherent problem of language. Let us take, for example, the notion of discursive tradition. Historicity is fundamental aspect of any discursive tradition. But, what we mean by the word history can in and of itself be a source of ambivalence and confusion. One might assume that to deploy the notion of history in relation to Islam, for instance, means, and one would not be entirely wrong, to perceive Islam as a discursive tradition that is not frozen in the long gone past but is rather constantly recreated in different historical moments and in being read anew.

Yet, this could very well be a reductive and misleading interpretation if one's perception of history led one to draw a clear cut separation between present, past, and future; if one ignored the fact that the present is not entirely free from the grip of the past and that the present is rather imprinted with the “given and inherited” consequences of the past (Marx, 2002: 19). “Tradition from all the dead generations,” as Marx suggests,

“weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (ibid). It is not merely true that we access the past within the limits and possibilities of our present, but that our present is not free from that which lies behind.⁴⁹ In discussing the intricate relationship between past and present, and memory and experience, Veena Das finds the following passage of Bergson, quoted by Deleuze, “particularly striking.”

Memory, laden with the whole of the past, responds to the appeal of the present state by two simultaneous movements, one of the *translation*, by which it moves in its entirety to meet experience, thus *contracting* more or less, though without dividing, with a view to action; the other of *rotation* upon itself, by which it turns toward the situation of the moment, presenting to it that side of itself which may prove to be the most useful (2007: 99).

According to Das, Deleuze views Bergson’s passage in relation to “a particular question....How can the virtual coexist with the actual?” (ibid). She goes on to explain Deleuze’s idea as: “In making this leap [from the present to the past] we place ourselves not generally in the elements of the past as such but in a particular space and time between temporal and duration and spatial context”(Das, 2007: 99-100). While these insights are critical for the way I speak of the question of the appeal to the past during the Iranian Revolution and after, I find myself somewhat in a blind spot in this passage in regard to the “counter-productive,” though not less weighty impact of traumatic and involuntary memories. Judith Butler writes of the role of loss, mourning, and melancholia in constituting subjected subjects (1997). I want to emphasize however a somewhat less highlighted point: that these subjectivities are not always desirable for us; that they, in fact, are often in conflict with our constantly changing, ideal subjectivity.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ In fact, Asad’s notion of discursive tradition, understandably, insists on a complex notion of temporality and on the fact that the re-invocations and re-interpretations are never entirely free.

⁵⁰ Asad’s discussion of pain could be helpful to understanding of this notion of “undesirable” agency.

If one's subjectivity is never produced without its relation to power, and if one's own ideals of subjectivity are different from that subjectivity that one has assumed for oneself, the result is, what I call, undesirable subjectivity. For neither our ideals are entirely our individual choices, nor is our individuality separate from our existence as social beings and therefore from our collective memory. In this dissertation, I show how the Iranians' perception of their subjectivities as objectionable and their sense of themselves as abject subjects led them to self-sacrificing acts and motivated them to revolt against their sociopolitical condition under the Shah. By undesirable subjectivity, I refer to the way the Iranian youth challenges their life situation and their subjectivities in smaller scale transgressions instead of the "revolutionary," redeeming, and self-sacrificing acts that were taken up by their parents, the "revolutionary generation," during and in the early years after the 1979 Revolution.

Evidently, not even in our dreams we really have that free or isolated space in which, as Maurice Halbwachs suggests, we can "live during a certain periods of time in a state of isolation which resembles, at least partially, the state in which [we] would live if [we] were in contact with no society." Born to language and society, we are no longer "capable" of not "relying on frames of collective memory" (Halbwachs, 1992: 40). These "collective frameworks of memory," for Halbwachs, "are not constructed after the fact by the combination of individual recollections; nor are they empty forms where recollections coming from elsewhere would insert themselves." Rather, they are "precisely the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society." Once again, we return to the question of power and the absolute vitality of remaining

cognizant of it. I attempt to show that it is essential to recognize that our selectiveness in choosing how to relate to or remember the past, or how to “translate and rotate” it is not always about its positive usefulness--as functionalist or rational choice theories suggest—but the particular ways our subjectivities are shaped by or limited by it. More importantly, we need to never lose sight of the dynamics of power and the way hegemonic forces deploy different means to impose an authoritative writing and reading of history to hyper-project certain elements of collective memory while erasing or dismissing others. Memories are not always clearly defined nor are we always free to choose those memories we like.⁵¹ It is crucial to realize that living in language and society, we are always already dealing with nationhood, hierarchies, class, gender, age, state, and the interplay of power, hegemony and violence.

In his discussion of the relationship between historical memories and nation-making, Joseph Massad employs Freud’s idea of history as mirror to suggest that “[t]his is exactly how historical memory as mirror identifies the nation’s subject by unifying its fragmented self. It is through this national identificatory mirror,” he argues, “that the ‘national’ is imaged/imagined as a category that assimilates all different experiences into it as one and the same.” Massad suggests that “[m]emory/counter-memory is a crucial instrument for nationalism” and that “[i]dentifying time as national or foreign is then imbricated in the core project of identifying nationals and foreigners” (2001: 26). Since the Revolution in Iran, more increasingly the struggle seems to revolve not only around what kind of mirror-history presents Iranians as a nation, but which times are national. Both are the grounds of contestation and yet, as recent events illustrate, while diversity

⁵¹ Even our very likes and dislikes are not unbounded, nor are they shaped or determined only by our economic status.

never fades away, it so appears that, in moments of crisis, many of the contested memories either diverge or are manipulatively utilized to reach a sense of “national unity.”⁵² In the process, the loss of ideals seems to induce, albeit in different degrees, dissatisfaction not merely with their sense of nationality but with their own subjectivity.

As we will see in this dissertation, for many Iranians, these tensions and disillusionments about their place in the world, history, and their subjectivity, have been and still are vital to the different ways they relate to, are influenced by, and seek role models in their selective history. It was precisely this sense of objectionable subjectivities and the related conditions prior to the 1979 Revolution that made guilt such a powerful tool with which revolutionary intellectuals appealed to Iranians. And it is still this sense of undesirable subjectivities that keeps the Iranians society at once the locus of so much conflict and tension and yet the fertilized ground for the formation of constantly shifting lively vibrant subjectivities. How the new ideals will be formed and what elements of the collective memory will be evolved I cannot foresee. However, I suggest that *shabih khāni* and the themes of Karbala will remain indispensable to this future, as it has been to its present, and that its transfiguration and that its transformation will be as diverse and complex as are Iranians.

Authoritative Maps and Divergent Itineraries

In the first chapter, I show how, in the 1960s and the 1970s, only a few years before the Revolution, both the leftists and the religious leaders worked with and

⁵² Just recently the state media broadcasted Khosro Golesorkhi's speech in his trial under the Shah which led to his execution. Golesorkhi was a leftist poet and activist who became a legendary figure under the Shah for his courageous speech. Under the Islamic Republic, his name and images disappeared from the public. But recently, in the midst of the nuclear energy crisis, the state TV broadcast his speech to remind people that he, a Marxist, saw Imam Ali as a pioneer in fighting for social justice and Imam Hussein as the legendary martyr.

highlighted the collectively “agreed” upon perception that the majority of Iranians were a silent and cowardly people who stood by indifferently as a small group of exceptionally courageous individuals sacrificed their lives for them. It was the accessibility of this image in Iranian collective memory, in the Karbala Narrative, that allowed even the leftists’ metaphor to be incorporated and read in line with that story. It is true that the left possessed its own tradition, stories of self-sacrifice, and legends, from which religious organizations borrowed quite a great deal. However, their limitations and the hold that the Karbala story had on Iranians’ collective memory deprived the leftists’ metaphors of their singularity, as well as massive popularity. In their own names they were dismissed but their content and language was appropriated to nourish and recreate the dominant memory-story line. The goal of the first chapter is to show the complex interplay of the “old” and the “new,” the “past,” and the “present,” the creative reading, and the authoritative memories. It explores their dynamics, particularly in relation to new regimes of power and knowledge in which the mass media at once obscures and magnifies class, gender and other distinctions within the nation. In addition, I show that the particular performative charisma of the clergy leaders in reading and staging the story of Karbala in relation to the present was critical to their greater access to the populace and their victory in the Revolution.

This chapter demonstrates how the image of those who stood by silently in the face of the martyrdom of others was easily extracted from the story of Karbala and its annual recitation in *shabih khāni*. They were like the people of Kufeh who stood silent as Imam Hussein and his companions were brutally killed, so the story was told, time and again. This same idea was actively utilized by the Islamic intellectuals during the

Revolution. However, only later was it directly articulated in a chant intended to bolster the support of Ali Khameneyee, who followed Khomeini as the Supreme Religious Leader, “Vali-e-Faghih.” Yet, during the Revolution, the aspiration to create different subjectivities in the end drew many Iranians out into the street in the face of the Shah’s bullets.

Khomeini was already being fashioned into an Imam at this point, as demonstrated, by the fact that millions of those “traitors” who, like the people of Kufeh, had stood aside as he was sent into exile by the Shah, now wished to die for him to prove otherwise. Now they shouted with the force of their lives of which they were ready to let go, to create themselves, even if for an instant, in the image of the ideal young men and women who had died or spoken against the brutalities to which Imam Hussein had been subjected. People’s willingness to die was expressed in their slogan: “either death or Khomeini.” Khomeini’s return from exile was to rewrite two already embarrassing historical events: the defeat of the anti-regime movement in 1953, which was demarcated by the return of the Shah from exile by the CIA Coup; and the compliance with the Shah’s Regime when it sent Khomeini into exile in 1963.

Chapter two of this dissertation illustrates how Khomeini appealed to metaphors, symbols and mytho-histories to refashion a new nation-state and new human beings, “adams” from Iranians, for which the most ideal model was that of the martyrs. The chapter takes its point of departure from the moment of Khomeini’s return to Iran from exile and his decision to direct millions of Iranians to the Behesht Zahra Cemetery where he gave his first speech on the graves of the martyrs. Using De Certeau’s “metaphor” of public transportation and his metaphoric usage of maps and itineraries, I argue that

Khomeini's speaking to the living in the presence of dead martyrs linked people and places of the dead and the living together (1984:115). I suggest that the modalities of the narrative of his return denoted the peculiar motifs of the new configuration of power and the sociopolitical trajectory towards which the "ommat" (the nation) was to be guided. While I speak of authoritative discourses and their transgressive readings, I try to retain the balance of which I spoke earlier, between discursive metaphors and metaphoric discourses.

In chapter three, I explore the relationship between the "habitus" of the living and the dead and the history of their conflation under the Shah and the Islamic Republic. I concentrate particularly on the graves of the state and dissident martyrs.⁵³ Since the dead and the living were linked from the day of Khomeini's arrival, the spaces of the living and the dead have also been significant grounds of conflict between the state and the nation, especially between the state and the families of dissidents who are deprived of regular burials like other dead. I attempt to illuminate the discriminatory treatments of their deaths, not only for the sake of the dead, but also as a means of attending to the living in their innovative, troubled, and challenging relationships to the dead. I suggest that in the modern history of Iran, struggles against the discriminatory delineation of social terrains for both the dead and the living are at once intertwined with and disruptive of the discourses and practices of modernity and its dualistic notions of public and private spheres.

This chapter elaborates how a particularly complex notion of history, which the Islamic ideologues offered to link the recent history of Iran to an early Islamic history in

⁵³ I use these terms to refer to the dead who were killed for or by the Regime, respectively.

which the conventional boundaries of temporality and spatiality were at once disrupted and recreated, allowed for deeply charged emotional relations of friends and enemies within and beyond the national borders. The ritual of cleansing the nation of its unfit members was intended to project a clear image of unity in the mirror of its present history, though as everything else in the mirror, the unity is always created at the expense of real diversity. To represent that diversity by breaking the mirror into pieces would not do; for it would only multiply the same illusively single image or images. Thus, I do not seek to turn the tables by, for instance, changing the dominant history from a grand narrative of the Islamic Republic to that of the Left, or any other political party for that matter. Rather, I let the undistinguished and divergent narratives or “acts of walking,” as De Certeau would refer to them, emerge. Thus, in chapter three, I discuss different regimes of surveillance, burial practices, and everyday experiences, of both “state martyrs” and “dissident martyrs” in order to demonstrate the diversity of ways people are challenged by and respond to these conditions.

Chapter four inserts itself in the interlude between the authoritative territorial rules and the innovative transgressive acts by journeying into the discriminatory spaces that the state has allocated for the state and dissident martyrs. The distinctive landscapes of the graveyards of these two groups of martyrs open a window to the memories of violence and self-sacrifice in external and internal wars and political suppression in post-revolutionary Iran. I argue that these cemeteries are the vicinities in which claims to “authentic” martyrdom are contested and the surfaces on which the memories and histories of the post-revolutionary Iran are carved.

This chapter speaks of the dead that have been unjustly deprived not only of their lives but also of their social death and of the possibility of being buried or mourned. It bleeds along with the hearts of those many families of martyred dissidents who live so that their dead continue to be recognized as the once-living and now dead individuals in the memory of their families I call “loyal mourners.” Yet, the chapter is entangled with another ethical dilemma: the position of the anthropologist whose multiple subjectivities is a challenge to conducting the research and writing about it. How does one remain just to two groups of subjects both of which are composed of the dead but one of which brutally tortured or killed many members of the other? Where does one draw the line of justice in such an intricate situation? How do I, the anthropologist, negotiate the fact that many dissident martyrs’ families employ their bodies as monuments for their lost ones and somehow expect the anthropologist’s “ethnography” to take on that role?

What is the job of a monument, to stand there as a relic that might itself be forgotten as many of the monuments in New York City that we pass without knowing of what or whom they are to remind us? Are not monuments also subject to the relations of power and politics of memory? How can an anthropologist reconcile these realities and the individual and social responsibility she assumes for herself? In this chapter, I have only hinted at these questions. The reader will see the struggles and challenges I face reflected in the different style of representation this chapter has, somewhat unconsciously, used: journal entries, different fonts, and dividing different sections by graphic symbols are examples and expressions of these different modes of subjectivity.

While the four chapters of the first part of the dissertation deal with histories, maps, itineraries, spaces, burials, and mourning and monuments, the last four chapters,

which comprise the second part, evolve around questions of authority, submission, the formation of subjectivities, and the creation of new languages. A concept of translation, in its widest sense, interlaces these four chapters both to one another and to the earlier chapters. These chapters deal with submission and transgression in diverse arenas such as religion, politics, revolutionary activism, mountain hiking, dreams and jokes. At the heart of the four chapters in part two are the interconnected themes of the metaphor of *shabih khāni*, questions of performance, and tensions concerning origins and representation in Iran since the 1960s.

Chapter five moves on two interconnected terrains. On the first plane, questions of submission, authority and their relationship to the human senses are approached through ethnographic accounts and embodiment in pre-and post-revolutionary Iran. I focus mainly on the left and the Islamic groups, with the shadow of the state stretching over both of them. I argue that notwithstanding all the differences between them, they share many similar notions and orientations that are rooted in their being and constructing themselves in a modern world and bearing a particular relation to power and knowledge. I suggest that one exemplary manifestation of these shared values can be found in the way the revolutionary generation, of both leftist and Islamic backgrounds, complain about the new generation's loss of value.

On the second terrain, this chapter attempts to problematize the binary opposition which posits modernity as either the era of nomos or of logocentrism; in other words I intend to challenge the simplifying views that either privilege writing over seeing or vice versa. I suggest that, in the aftermath of language, sight is itself informed and influenced by language and is shot through with it. Our eyes see within the limits of the horizon that

language has opened up. This issue is particularly important in relation to the way our senses work together in refashioning our selves. I pursue this interrelation from the story of the “Amānat” (Trust), as the Message of God which was revealed to Mohammad, the Prophet, who was known as Amin (Trust keeper) to the absolute submission that some Iranians offered Khomeini, whom they saw as the Amānatdār (trust keeper). This chapter also explores the mystifying manner in which these relations are made possible by the technologies of modern regimes of truth and knowledge.

In chapter six, I argue that Khomeini’s enduring presence is ultimately not based on a notion of charisma in the Weberian sense, which emphasizes the personality of the charismatic leader. I borrow instead the notion of charisma as a performative social phenomenon from Thomas Csordas (1997), to explain the victory of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and the source of Khomeini’s popularity and excessive power which is the topic of several popular jokes. I suggest that neither Khomeini’s unique character, nor the absurd assumption that people are naive and easily fooled, as has often been suggested by some opponents of the Islamic Republic, nor the “Iranians’ pathological obsession with martyrdom” (Swenson, 1985), can explain this phenomenon. This notion of charisma as socially performative allows for a better understanding of concepts on basic issues such as life, death and divinity which appear to be shared and yet are subject to multilaterally subjective readings within the community. It offers the potential of unity and contestation within the same “unit,” in relation to the particular modes of subjectivity.

I have chosen to call the Islamic Republic a state of modern *shabih khāni*. By this term, I intend to emphasize two interrelated characteristics of this state: the constantly rehearsed performance of its leaders to make and write new histories with

familiar themes, rhetoric, metaphors, and symbols as if reenactment of an original event; and the diversities of views and phenomena that are compressed under the umbrella of the Islamic state, as if in *shabih khāni*. This chapter turns to dreams and their connection to two different conceptions of life. It shows how conceiving life as *amānat* (trust) annihilates one's own or others' ownership to one's life. Life in this sense belongs only to God. But how does one justify sacrificing a life that is not one's own? While this chapter complicates notions of self-sacrifice in which it is generally seen as a gift or as exchange, it also speaks of dreams as a way of claiming relation to and thus legitimizing self-sacrifice.

Chapter seven begins with a transliterated text—a joke—that takes the reader through a somewhat elongated trajectory before revealing its content. I have purposefully avoided a robust introduction in this chapter to mime the manner of this specific genre of jokes in Iran today which plays with the duration of the revelation as much as with what is revealed. The chapter moves through different stages of translation to turn a transliterated text into a discursive analysis of the implications and conditions of possibilities of such language games. It suggests that the jokes are complex ways of expressing dissident views about taboo issues such as martyrdom and the Iran-Iraq War. While the chapter attempts to extend the meaning of language to social behavior and to show similarities between jokes and other social and personal actions, it tries to avoid over-generalizing.

The chapter also shows how an annual national celebration of “Chahar shanbeh souri” (the last Tuesday before the Iranian New Year) that used to be an occasion of fun and celebration for all Iranians, regardless of class, religion, gender or age has now

turned into a frighteningly absurd display of random violence by some teenagers that almost paralyzes Tehran. I here juxtapose fun and jokes not to suggest that they can substitute for or exclude one another but rather to demonstrate that there are in fact different possibilities of subject formation and divergent ways to work through pain and anger in relation to traumatic and violent experiences not all of which are socially and individually harmless.

Finally, chapter eight concludes the dissertation by revisiting different issues discussed in the earlier chapters while concentrating on the relationship between language and everyday experiences. I show how the loss of revolutionary ideals has left a void within which undesirable yet pragmatic subjectivities are produced. I suggest that, despite all variations, guilt continues to burden the conscience of the “revolutionary generation” even though it is now deprived of the revolutionary hopes that it had before and during the revolutionary era. I also show how sociopolitical groups and even different generations have eased their guilt by blaming one another but now more pointedly blame the state. I propose that the relationship between the “revolutionary generation” and the “children of the Revolution” is complicated by the existence of a simultaneous sense of guilt and blame that is both projected inward and outward.

Through ethnographic accounts, I illustrate how the game of words has been a widespread phenomenon under the Islamic Republic and I suggest that this should not come as a surprise because of the very fact that the state has assumed for itself the guardianship of the “Sacred Word.” I highlight how these games are played not only by children and the youth, but are prevalent on a much wider scale in society and in official discourses. I show how, for instance, during the Iran-Iraq War, martyrdom was

commemorated as marriage to God, and was materially represented in public in wedding symbols called “hejlehs.”⁵⁴ I suggest that in post-revolutionary Iran, language has functioned as a weapon, a substitution and a sublimation in relation to different regimes of power and knowledge and in myriad capacities and forms. But more importantly, I use the jokes and these games of words mainly to represent a dissidence voice and as an attempt to speak about otherwise unspeakable issues. I compare the way the Iranians express discontent about their “undesirable subjectivities” through jokes by recognizing the limits of their freedom.

The Problem of Representation: Who Is an Iranian Today?

To ascribe predicates to a people is always dangerous: in the end, everything is so mixed that a unity develops only late, through the language—or an illusion of unity (Nietzsche: 1982: 41)

Let us return all the way back to the beginning, to the shocking revelation of a penis in the body of religious symbols of mourning and commemoration of the Karbala Martyrs, in Poyān’s remarks. The existence of attitudes like that of Poyān within the very town he considers miserable for its intense public mourning of Moharram does not merely confirm my discussion of these particular metaphors as discursive, but it also reminds us of how complicated understanding and representing a people is. One can only give a sense of a people and their culture in their living moment, which means in the midst of their making, remaking, contradicting and deconstructing themselves and their cultures. The complexity, on the one hand, arises from an apparent but often ignored fact that the context within which people’s subjectivities are formed is dependent not only on

⁵⁴ Hejlehs were not the invention of the Islamic Republic. It was not uncommon for Iranians to erect “hejelh” to symbolize the death of their male unmarried young loved ones. Under the Islamic Republic, however, “hejleh” became a symbol of martyrdom, mainly, of men, regardless of their age.

their immediate locality and temporality, but also on the fact that the locality is itself created and defined in relation to the world at large.

On the other hand, the complexity of representation is rooted in its inherent problem: its inevitable failure to convey the multiplicities of positions, directions, and subjectivities that are created at every instant. The moment I introduce the reader to Poyān in the opening episode, I pigeonhole him in a particular moment of being that excludes all the other ways he “was,” and was becoming, even right then. Later in the chapters, the reader will read about other dimensions of his character, for instance, his reaction to the teenage martyrs’ photos in the Museum of Martyrs in Shalamche—a town that was ripped apart being captured and recaptured during the Iran-Iraq War. But this would not make up for the fact that petrification is epitomized in each episode.⁵⁵ It will only offer another petrifying moment, as if introducing a double of Poyān, as if doubling him. The moment one frames people, one takes the real life out of them and forces them into coffins, into a dead community, which is no longer constitutive of “real” people with “real culture.”⁵⁶ As Dabashi points out, this process of framing and naming and loss

⁵⁵ Michael Fischer suggests that “the ethnographic endeavor—unlike that of the philosopher or political activist—is not to harmonize other people’s thought, but to inquire why people who seem to be saying similar things insist they are doing quite different things and their followers may ignore the differences, to try to present the ranges of interpretation, the differences, the changes over time” (Fischer, 1980: 244). While his point is very well taken, the reality is that regardless, any attempt to convey an image, an idea, can never fully encompass all the complexities and contradictions. For even in our best intentions, our eyes are unable to see all and through; our brain cannot digest too much contradiction and our writing would become incoherent without our methods of classification, imposing order, and reductions of elements.

⁵⁶ In his now already old book, Vincent Crapanzano suggests that by “eliminating [the anthropologist] from the ethnographic encounter, the anthropologist can deny the essential dynamics of the encounter and end up producing a static picture of the people he has studied and their ways.” In Crapanzano’s words, “it is this *picture*, frozen within the ethnographic text, that becomes the “culture” of the people.” Writing at the time when self-reflective anthropology was the mood of the moment, he suggests that the “ethnographic encounter, like any other encounter between individuals or, for that matter, with oneself in moments of self-reflection, is always a complex negotiation in which the parties to the encounter acquiesce to a certain reality,...to none of the parties to the encounter. It is—and this is most important—usually presumed to be the reality of one’s counterpart to which one has acquiesced, to expedite the matter on hand”(1980: ix). Putting oneself in the “picture” is important for the people respond to these encounters within their socio-

reminds one of the old saying about Sufism which states that the moment of naming is the instant of its loss.⁵⁷

Nearly every cab driver in Iran conveyed to me this wisdom about the impossibility of a thorough understanding and representation of a people. “So, what did you say you are studying?” a middle aged cab driver asked me in 2003. “Anthropology” (mardom shenāsi),⁵⁸ I hesitantly told him and waited to hear a cynical response which he surely offered right away. “How wonderful. So... could you please tell us who we Iranians are? Has your study taught you to “recognize” us? Can you tell us what kind of “jonevars” (animals) we are and who is ruling this country?⁵⁹ It would actually be a blessing if someone could “know”⁶⁰ us because we ourselves don’t.” His tone had that familiar mixture of naiveté and wisdom in Iranian culture—that unexpected sagacity which emerges from behind the mask of a seemingly simple minded and often illiterate

cultural context but they are also affected by them. The dialectic of this ethnographic encounter is therefore complex and again not easily framable.

⁵⁷Dabashi relates a telling story about Shahla Haeri’s conversation with an Iranian rural woman. When Haeri, an anthropologist who lives in the US, promises this woman that in her next return to Iran, [from the US], she will bring her “one thing or another,” the woman asks if Iran is a nearby village (Dabashi: 2007, 20). Even though the question of nation-state is at the forefront for the subjects about whom I am writing, especially since they have lived through war and state violence and thereby have become conscious of borders and of nation-states, the complexity of Iran and Iranians and what they mean to each and every person still remain relevant to them.

⁵⁸ “Mardom shenāsi” literally means studying people. The exact term for anthropology is in fact “ensān shenāsi” which in Iran refers mainly to biological anthropology.

⁵⁹ This question, “who is the real ruler of this country,” was commonly asked, at least of me. It was meant as a cynical question the answer to which was assumed to be implicit but known to all: “Imam Zaman” (the Twelfth Imam who is in occultation). It was to suggest that the fact that there is no order in the country and that things occur in unpredictable ways and one constantly expects the country to collapse; yet it does not which means that an absent force is controlling it somewhere from afar.

⁶⁰ He was playing with the word “shenasi” which in Farsi means recognizing someone, something, or some place, or understanding them. Knowing, on the other hand, refers to knowledge. “To know,” in English, stands for both terms in Farsi. This is a common mistake made by children who are raised in the US when they speak Farsi. They would translate the term from English into Farsi as knowing not recognizing. For instance, my nephew was the subject of our jokes because while talking about a person, instead of saying “oh, I recognize him or her” (mishnasamesh), he would say I have knowledge of him or her which comes across as though one is talking about one’s knowledge of chemistry or such.

persona that evokes the character of “Bahlool.” In Iranian culture and literature, Bahlool is the epitome of the fusion of this shrewdness and assumed naiveté. He is known to reach the heart of the matter by acting as though he knew nothing about it, as if, in Benjamin’s words, “no one ever masters anything in which he has not known impotence; and...that this impotence comes not at the beginning or before the struggle with the subject, but in the heart of it” (cited by Gilsenan, 1982:272).⁶¹

Of course Bahlool and our cab driver’s “cynical” pretense of naiveté are not the same as Benjamin’s flaneur’s wandering around in the city, which he compares to the finding of one’s way in the forest by relying on one’s “organic” senses and “instinctive” knowledges.⁶² But in their allusion to the unconventional forms of knowledge and its acquisition they speak to one another. I should, however, explicate that by the notion of depending on one’s organic senses, I do not deny our being always already in the world and in language, nor do I offer it as a gesture to undermine one’s conventionally acquired knowledge. I rather conjure this notion as a never achievable and yet imperative utopian aspiration for seeking to see, like blossoms that every spring experience the world for first time, yet with a vague memory of something that invokes a sense of seeing with different eyes. Neither the eyes nor that which they see is the same as before. For memory is engraved in the body of the tree and its surroundings.

This suggests that one should approach the subject or the place of one’s research as one would a blank piece of paper which nevertheless carries the memory of the felled

⁶¹While the impotence that is suggested by Benjamin is more about an intentional manner of being a “flaneur,” or rather the schooling of oneself to be lost in order to learn differently, in their gesture of their naiveté, Bahlool and Benjamin’s Flaneur resemble one another.

⁶² In Benjamin’s view this manner of losing one’s way in the city “calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passer-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a crackling twig under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its centre” (quoted in Gilsenan, 1982: 271).

oak tree from which it is produced. One of course neither can nor should try to escape from that which one knew before, but it will allow for an entirely different experience of learning. In this sense, one's knowledge is retained not as the paper on which one writes but as a blank page in whose texture a vague memory of the oak tree reverberates.⁶³ This allows for the paper to accept new writing while the reminiscences of the "primitive wound" enable it to take its own scars as at once new and yet commensurable with that of the "old loss." This means looking with the eyes of an infant and yet with the memory that is carried throughout history.⁶⁴

I consider this utopian desire as the ethical responsibility of anthropologists, as vital as is living justly, in our "out of joint" and unjust world.⁶⁵ It was this old wisdom, like the inherited memories of earlier generations, that the cab driver's remark insinuated when he challenged me with my "science of knowing people" (*mardom shenāsi*). His wisdom implied that any attempt to portray Iranians—or any other people for that matter—would face an inevitable failure if it tried to offer an all-encompassing image. This reality should compel the anthropologist to always anticipate the question of where Iranians are in the representation and remain humbled by the complexity of the people with whom they have worked.

⁶³ Paul Stoller's notion of "sensuous scholarship" is along the same line if we consider the fact that one does not only see with one's eyes but also with one's body. For Stoller, "*sensuous scholarship* is an attempt to reawaken profoundly the scholar's body by demonstrating how the fusion of the intelligence and the sensible can be applied to scholarly practices and representations" (1997: xv).

⁶⁴ Crapanzano points out the problem of ethnographic data becoming subordinated to theory. He writes: "To speak too simply, data for the social scientist are frequently sacrificed to the theory; for the critic, theory is sacrificed to the text. In Tuhami I struggle to sacrifice neither and thereby risk a double sacrifice" (1989: xiii). I am concerned firstly by the way one "gathers" the "data" or "observes" a people.

⁶⁵ "Every interpretive strategy, including those implicit within description itself," as Crapanzano writes, "involves choice and falls, thereby, into the domain of ethics and politics" (1989: x-xi). I would suggest that since nothing exists beyond interpretation, representation is always already an ethico-political matter.

The scholarship on the impossibility of a “real representation” of our ethnographic subjects, and at best, their “partial truths” has now become almost as old as some of the young subjects of my research—if the birth of this idea is considered from the publication of *Writing Culture* by James Clifford’s and George Marcus in 1986. I will not repeat these debates on a never-representative representation about which so many scholars of different disciplines have commented. Nor will I herein discuss the very limitation of the language by which we communicate. Instead, I will have Eduardo Cavada’s reading of Benjamin summarize this all:

This image of the past—and of the irretrievable past it intends—may be “fleeting” and “flashing” but it is also susceptible to being held fast—even if what is seized is only the image in its disappearance. In other words, if “the true picture of the past flits by,” it is not so much that we are unable to grasp the truth of the past, but rather that the *true* picture of the past *flits* by, the *true* picture of the past is the one always in a state of passing away (1995: 235).

Considering the fact that the very present becomes already past and passes by, if not away, at the moment that is lived, the above citation should be read not merely as the “true picture of the past *flits* by” but also as the impossibility of capturing any “true picture.” Yet impossibilities lie at the heart of our very existence,⁶⁶ as do striving to get as close as possible to their unreachable horizons. Similarly, in one’s ambition to represent a people, a history, an experience, a voice, one has always to deal with two inherently contradictory realities: one must, on the one hand, feel committed to the idea that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” and, on the

⁶⁶ “One way or another longing is the loss of life, and loss the life of longing. Speak about a hound, a boy horse, and a turtledove to others, and they will know what you mean; remind them of loss, and they too will become anxious to recover what you alone have lost. Loss is the rock bottom foundation of the communal (Harrison, 1992: 231).

other hand, recognize that one will never fully capture that which happens in and to history (Benjamin, 1968: 245).⁶⁷ This contradiction between the “reality” and that which we represent has been eloquently conveyed by Nietzsche, through reaching far deep into our language. He writes:

He [and I add she] forgets that the original perceptual metaphors are metaphors and takes them to be the things themselves. Only by forgetting this primitive world of metaphor can one live with any repose, security, and consistency: only by means of the petrification and coagulation of a mass of images which originally streamed from the primal faculty of human imagination like a fiery liquid, only in the invincible faith that *this* sun, *this* window, *this* table is a truth in itself, in short, only by forgetting that he himself is an *artistically creating* subject, does man live with any repose, security, and consistency. If but for an instant he could escape from the prison walls of this faith, his “self consciousness” would be immediately destroyed (Nietzsche, 1873: 7).

These complexities and impossibilities characterized my project from the beginning to the end—is there any?—and in myriad ways. I entered my research topic while my desire and ethical responsibility inclined me to bring to light the experiences and sufferings of families of the two groups of “martyrs” within the nation, which for different reasons were forced into secrecy. But my body carried scars and memories that interfered and clouded my way of seeing through some of the experiences. I found it challenging not to walk away from the grave of a revolutionary guard who could have been an interrogator and I could not always face the challenge. Neither was it easy to gain the trust of different leftist organizations considering their history of hostility to one another. The struggle was to leave the accustomed ways of seeing and feeling behind, to learn how to lose and find one’s way by returning to one’s “primitive senses.” Only by

⁶⁷ According to Benjamin, while a historical materialist holds a notion of present as a transition but in writing history, the past becomes present in which “time stands still and has come to a stop” (1968: 262). A similar dynamic seems to characterize the relationship between time and ethnographic representation.

relating to pain on two totally different levels, the most general, primitive, and organic sense of pain and the very context-specific painful experience, might one be able to understand the complexity and specificity of pain beyond one's own personal memory.

The notion of Benjamin's "still time" might be evoked here as a way of thinking about the power of historical experiences and memories to affect our present. It is only through fresh and yet old eyes that one might be able to relate to the anxiety of those Iranians who perceive the Islamic Republic as an embarrassing "return" to fourteen hundred years ago and of those for whom this "return" is the only way to reclaim Iranians' integrity in the world. The Islamic Republic wrote a history that acknowledge the pain of the one and erased that of the other: the subjects of my research. My ethical responsibility and aspiration to move beyond my personal injuries and rely on the wounds that emanated from a longer history was not necessarily always liberating, or successful. Stoller's notion of "sensuous scholarship" (1997) worked at once like the poison and the remedy.

In this sense, Dabashi's insight in imagining Iran as a nation of divergent inclinations and aspirations, which despite all contradictions are magnetically drawn towards a center, is incredibly helpful. This view surmises a complex living society with great diversities and inconsistencies and yet allows for the possibility of an ephemeral unity manifested, for instance, in the Revolution of 1979. It enables one to make sense of the complex dynamics of sacrifice in post-revolutionary Iran, wherein a feminized version of the Abrahamic sacrifice was created when the mass media publicized a mother's response to Khomeini's call by reporting on her leftist son to the regime. The

son was unhesitatingly and promptly executed, though not before the entire scenario was made into a national show to which almost all Iranians became spectators.

This event which occurred in 1981, only two years after the victory of the Revolution and the inception of the Islamic Republic and already a year into the Iran-Iraq War, illustrates the intricate factors and memories that are intertwined and manipulated to create a single seemingly solid, harmonious act. It also indicates the problem of its “dissection” into its constitutive elements without losing sight of the complexity of their synthesis. The particular context within which the feminized version of sacrifice was highlighted is too convoluted to capture. Suffice it here to mention that in its attempt to consolidate itself, the Regime had begun crushing its dissidents as early as 1981. The external War with Iraq, the War in Kurdistan Province and the political suppression within the entire country called for an expansion in massive sacrifices. To legitimize its claim to the divine and the earthly terrains, the state performed double sacrifices of the pure and the impure, in Hubert and Mauss’ terms, as if “rites of sacralization and desacralization” (1964: 6).⁶⁸ It considered the sacrifice of those who were killed in the war as an ultimate act of support for the state, which purified its dead as martyrs. On the other hand, those who were killed by the state as its opponents were classified as impure, both as the living and the dead. The state utilized the “state martyrs” both to fortify its claim to sacredness, and as ideal role models in refashioning the subjects-citizens of the new nation-state. The killing of the dissidents was also to cleanse the national body from profanity, so that the state could continue assigning to itself the title of “the only true

⁶⁸ Hubert and Mauss define consecration as the sacrifice in which “an object passes from the common to the religious domain.” They suggest that the “primordial component of sacrifice,” which they categorize either as individual or collective, is the “expulsion of a sacred spirit, whether pure or impure” (1964: 6).

representative of God on earth,”⁶⁹ and regulating the nation by carrying out the punishment that deviation incurs.

Not only the families of those fighting the enemies, but also those whose children were considered state enemies were to willingly give away their children in support of the state. In order to eliminate transgression and to keep the society in a state of emergency, by creating constant sense of perilous risk of contamination, both types of sacrifices had to be performed and acknowledged in relation to the state. Thus, performing these “sacrificial rituals” was a critical way to mobilize and sustain positive responses to calls for sacrifice and to consolidate the authoritative role of the state. No wonder, therefore, that this episode about the mother who turned in her son to the Regime, following Khomeini’s call,⁷⁰ was repeatedly broadcast on national television. The entire nation could now become “witness” to this ideal and ultimate act of sacrificing a son for Islam and for the state. She was portrayed as an ideal role model for Muslim women, one whose love for Islam outweighed her “instinctual motherly love for her son.”

But the story was derived from a long tradition and collective memory of Abrahamic sacrifices.⁷¹ It also was an outcome of the complex amalgamation of these myriad elements in Iranians’ collective memory fused with Maxim Gorki’s *Mother* that enabled the introduction of a feminine version of sacrifice. At the time of the story, Gorki’s *Mother* and Bertolt Brecht’s adaptation of it in his influential play by the same

⁶⁹ We will later see how this difference also affects the way the “dissident martyrs” are robbed of their singularity and are cleansed as if dirty while the state martyrs are singularized.

⁷⁰ Unlike God’s single call for Abraham to sacrifice his son, Khomeini’s call included all Iranians for willing to sacrifice and be sacrificed for Islam and the nation in which each and every member of the nation was to consider him or herself singularly summoned.

⁷¹ The sacrificial “event” has also been annually observed as a religious ritual. The day of “Aid-e-Ghorban” (the Celebration of Sacrifice) was observed by all Muslim Iranians, if not even non-Muslims, every year. During this day Iranians were to sacrifice a lamb, perform particular public prayers and of course revisit the story of Abraham and the call to sacrifice his son, Isma’il, and God’s mercy in offering him a lamb instead.

title, were fresh in Iranians' memories, as they were not that much older than the Revolution of 1979. During and for a short while after the Revolution, aside from a particular group of educated urban youth who had access to the book, the Brechtian version was played for the public on local stages and on streets by vanguard leftist stage actors and actresses. By recognizing these realities, one might fathom the manner in which this feminized model of Abrahamic sacrifice would then be played out on state television.⁷²

Rather than the dismissal of the character of the mother in Gorki's novel, the state combined the two notions of sacrifice, the sacrifice of the son by the father, Abraham, and that of the mother for her son, (Gorki's story), thereby expanding the idea of sacrifice in a novel way with regards to gender.⁷³ The Iranian Muslim mother's courage was compared to the character of the mother in Maxim's Gorki's novel to show the subordination of the leftists' values and courage to that of the Islamic Republic. At the time, the active role of the left in fighting the Shah's Regime was still vividly remembered and was the subject of an ongoing debate.⁷⁴ As with Abraham, whose greater love for God was confirmed by his willingness to sacrifice his son for God, this Iranian mother's unwavering love for Islam was also proved, so the state propaganda suggested, by that fact that she subordinated her "instinctual motherly love" for her son to her love for Khomeini. But contrary to Abraham's story, here, no mercy in the form of a

⁷² In one of these times that *Mother* was played on stage, my mother along with many other mothers in the audience became so emotional that, while crying, they went to the stage and hugged the actress-Mother.

⁷³ We recall that in the story of Abrahamic sacrifice the mother is the excluded party with whom God does not even communicate. She would have to live with the consequences of the decision that is made solely by the father. But the modern Iran requires sacrifices of both genders; thus emerges the story of this mother to the call for sacrifice.

⁷⁴ This was especially true of the leftist guerillas' pioneering role in the victory of the Revolution of 1979.

lamb was offered.⁷⁵ Instead, the officials honored the mother as more courageous than Gorki's,⁷⁶ for, as they argued, the latter had simply followed her "natural" love for her son and defended him, as any good mother would have. The Iranian mother's act, on the other hand, was beyond that of an ordinary human. She had overcome her "humanly, normal, motherly love," by placing her love of Faith and of the nation not only above but also against her motherly love.⁷⁷

From the Dagger to the Microphone

To decipher the depths of these metaphoric discourses and their complexities, I will turn to a different youngster, Roshan, also the son of an executed leftist father. It is interesting to read his approach in juxtaposition to that of Poyān, of whom we read in the opening of this introduction. Roshan refers to his mood during the "martyrdom period" (ayyām-e-shahādat) of Imam Hussein as a "state of madness" (hālat-e-divānegi). It is hard to imagine that this skinny vivacious young man whose deep dark sparkling eyes radiate with the forceful power of love for life, soccer, and "beautiful girls," whose naughtiness, great sense of humor, and loud laughter cannot but cheer up everyone around him, leaves his beloved mother, little brother, and loving step-father behind for the entire two weeks of Moharram to live in a mosque.

⁷⁵ There were many speculations as to why she reported on her son. Aside from those who suggested the story that was more fitting with the official narrative, others suggested that it was either her temporary infatuation with Khomeini that had momentarily undermined her love for her son, or her hope for mercy from him that led the mother to do what she did. The rumor was that her release from these delusions, her infatuation with Khomeini and her hope in his mercy, led her to insanity.

⁷⁶ The common way of referring to this character of mother in Gorki's book in Iran was simply "Maxim Gorki's mother" (mādar-e-maxim Gorki).

⁷⁷ Although it seems strangely odd but the state's emphasis on teaching Iranian mothers to follow this role model of sacrifice reminds me of "the uncanny returns with the repetition" of Kittler's "mother mouth" and his notion of men instructing mothers how to teach their sons to be good servants of the state (1990).

“I take my blanket and my pillow to the mosque on the first day of Moharram and stay there until the third day of Hussein’s martyrdom,” Roshan tells me and adds: “I cannot eat, nor do I sleep that much on these days or nights. I cry so much that after two weeks when I come back, my voice is nearly gone and my mom is shocked at how different I look.” As Roshan explains to me, he is not alone in his “mad love for Hussein.” He is in fact only one of those individuals who call themselves “crazies in love with Hussein” (*divanegān-e-`ashegh-e-Hussein*).⁷⁸ “There are a few of us in this neighborhood and of course many more all around Iran. I will show you one of those “mourning hymns shows” on DVD,” Roshan tells me with a strange naughtiness in his tone as though revealing his first experience smoking pot. He does not even refer to Hussein as Imam but rather in an intimate tone as Hussein or Hussein jān,”⁷⁹ as one would call one’s family members or close friends.

It was not that long after Roshan’s promise that in a little town in the Northwest of Iran, he and I and several others watched the DVD of a mourning procession of one of these “crazies for Hussein’s bands.” The rhythm and lyrics of the mourning hymn (*noheh*) bizarrely resembled those of the contemporary pop love songs in Los Angeles and the recently produced ones in Iran. The fact that it felt so normal for us to sit in a room, sip our tea, and watch this “show” on a TV screen enunciated the indispensability of the media to modern religiosity. The young men screamed: “I am in love with you

⁷⁸ This could also be translated as those madly in-love with Hussein.

⁷⁹ “Jān” is used by Iranians after the names or family relations, as a dearing gesture. Hussein jān is an intimate and dearing manner of calling someone whose name is Hussein. The term suggests an informal and friendly relationship. It can be also used with titles. i.e., “bābā Jān” (dear dad), “māmān jān” (dear mom), “khāleh jān” (dear aunt) and so forth.

Hussein jān” (‘āsheghetam Hussein Jān); repetition of these words, rhythmic pulsation of their bodies, and heavy panting filled the room with a powerful air of orgasmic vivacity.

How does one read these two different approaches, Poyān’s and Roshan’s, and their relationships to the mourning processions of Imam Hussein?⁸⁰ Let me remind the reader that Poyān and Roshan were both born to leftist parents, were directly impacted by the political suppression that targeted their fathers—Roshan’s father “was martyred”—and both youngsters looked hip and joked about many similar topics, including clergy members. Despite radical differences, many commonalities bind their attitudes to one another. In relation to the “Crazies for Imam Hussein’s” band, what appeared so bizarre to me was neither its orgasmic mood, nor that we sipped our tea as we watched it—for do not many of us eat and drink and watch TV as American bombs kill Iraqi people? Nor was it entirely novel to see the audience of this “religious mourning show” sing along with the vocalist and move their bodies to the hymn’s rhythm, similar to the atmosphere of a concert. It was not even simply that our dualistic view of religion and secularism would conveniently ignore this very similitude and assume the reactions of participants in a religious ritual automatically a trance-like state, an altered state of consciousness, while those of the audience of a concert are to manifest a conscious and voluntary relationship to entertainment and pleasure.

I was rather astonished by two aspects of this “religious show.” As I mentioned earlier, the tone and lyrics of these religious hymns entailed an incredible resemblance to

⁸⁰This is precisely the struggle I face throughout this dissertation: the dilemma of sounding coherent while avoiding simplification and categorization of a people. I could not put it any better than Hamid Dabashi does: “Iran” is a state of mind, systematically set to contradict itself. I wish to map out the contours of that contradiction, the paradoxes of its contemporary whereabouts” (2007: 9)

the recent trendy pop music in Iran.⁸¹ One almost expected to see the audience dancing along to the rhythm, which reminded me of the dialectical relationship between religious ceremonies and popular trends, both of which seek marketability and the ability to engender a particular market. Far stranger to me was when suddenly the “hymn singer” (noheh khān) began to hit his head with the microphone. In my town when I was young, I had watched men on the street cutting their head with large daggers, during Ashura, the tenth day of the month of Moharram, when Imam Hussein was killed. But hitting the head with a microphone, which also occurred in the mourning procession of Imam Hussein, was a novelty with provocative implications. It offered insight into the complex and performative role of, and relationship between the sacred, violence, and the media, all of which are, in one way or another, bound up with the global market economy today.

In writing about violence and the sacred, McKenna suggests that: “What first takes place, according to Girard, is violence, and what then takes its place is the sacred” (1992:69).⁸² I would go a step farther to maintain that both the sacred and violence are connected to one another through their inherent need for representation and therefore for the media. Exploration of the role of media in mystifying, beautifying, and sacralizing violence is critical not merely to my project, but also to the prevailing debates among scholars. The already complicated question of violence, particularly self-inflicted violence, be it for personal pleasure or in religious rituals (Asad, 1997), is further complicated when perceived in relation to the media and its critical role in the economy

⁸¹ And yet the fact is that resemblance between singing and religious hymns is not a novelty. Iranian classical music is as much influenced by religious songs as the other way around. The surprising character is perhaps mainly due to the nature of the music that was being imitated, an upbeat, festive sounding music.

⁸² He suggests that they both “require a victim. The victim is the issue of violence and the origin of the sacred” (1992:69).

of public mourning. This relationship between the sacred, violence and media, and their inevitable “democratization” and diversification which results in their moving beyond authoritatively guarded boundaries, again invokes Marx and Engels’ appeal to the metaphors of spells and sorcerers to explain the dynamics of production and the exchange of commodities (see above Marx, Engels, 1998:57). Similarly, that a religious mourning procession employs a device of public communication, the microphone, as if a dagger, is indicative of the complex relationship between these presumably contradictory elements not only in post-revolutionary Iran, but in the larger world. I take these relations and differences between the episodes I have herein introduced to stand as metaphors for the way religiosity, violence and the politics of states and spaces have played out in Iran since the 1960s. In revisiting Poyān’s approach to the Karbala mourning procession, it appears that the transformation of religious symbols into sexual organs occurs on a symbolic level. Even though, here as well, the elements of public eye and the eye of the public are at the heart of this exchange, the religious symbols are invaded by voyeuristic sexual desire in the realm of language, in words. This does not mean that verbal symbolic intervention cannot engender particular physical results but, rather, that the shift—which is not, in fact, the replacement of one by another but the raiding of one into the body of another—is an imaginary and symbolic one.

In the cutting of the head by a dagger, the means of violence, the dagger, also takes on the role of a medium of communication. Its shining presence, its large size, sharp edge, and bloody appearance draws public attention. Its potentially fatal impact communicates to the audience the gravity of the person’s grief for Imam Hussein’s martyrdom, which he materially demonstrates by inflicting injury on himself. This is, of

course, only one of many possible readings, for as any text, this one too could be received in many other ways. One could easily suggest that it is not the gravity of the pain of martyrdom that the person communicated through injuring his head by a dagger, but the gravity of the guilt in identification with the Kufee people who remained silent when Imam Hussein was being martyred. The theme of guilt, as I will show in this dissertation, has been an important factor in subject and nation making in modern Iran.

But even here, the utilization of the dagger simultaneously as a medium of communication and of violence does not take place in a directly physical corporeal sense. This co-functioning rather occurs, somewhat subtly but inevitably, like the image that might pass through eyes and enter unconsciousness and become part of our visual memory without our consciousness recognizing or holding a clear memory of it. People could watch the dagger without thinking of it as a media and yet it will affect them as a media.

Let's compare the two above motifs to the hitting of the head with the microphone, in which the medium of communication itself is used as a violent means of "self-abuse." That is, this alternative function has a materialized and "transparent" character. It is seen and recognized by the organic eye. The eyes would not miss the microphone that hits the head. To dispute it, one has to return to the domain of language. One might argue that the hitting does not symbolize violence, or that self-abuse cannot be equated with violence, so on and so forth, but one cannot claim that the eyes did not see the hand that was raised with the microphone to hit the head. Thus while it is clear that from Poyān's "alam" and "penis" to the "religious show," we come full circle from language back to language, the point of our arrival is different from that of our departure.

Language, we have been told by so many scholars (Derrida, Foucault, Morris), always entails a return, though as with every return, that of the language is never a true return, but a turn to a point that is renewed at each arrival.⁸³ For, as Bakhtin suggests: “Every utterance brings into being a distinct accent, denotation, and a new imprinting in the memory” (2000: 290). I attend to the imprints of these realities in the 1979 Iranian Revolution and thereafter.

⁸³ The economy of the relationship among language, mourning, and memorialization is pointed out by Marilyn Ivy. She suggests that “[m]emorialization and mourning involve distinct ensembles of practices, narratives, and uses of language: memorialization practices tend to be enfold more explicitly within what could be called, following Michel de Certeau, a ‘scriptural’ economy” (1995: 149).

PART I

Chapter 1

The Battle of Metaphors: *Shabih Khāni* (Reading Similarity) of the Revolution

The negligent ones are Harmonious!⁸⁴
 Only the storm bears heterogeneous children
 Harmonious are those who resemble the shadow
 Cautious within the boundaries of the sun
 They are the living embodiment of the dead!
 And yet these others!
 They throw their hearts into the sea
 They are the igniters of the fire,
 The living ahead of death
 Always alive by the same name they lived

84 After translating this poem, I came across a translation by Iraj Kaboli that is posted in Ahmad Shamloo's official site. Attached to my labor, I compromised the quality by deciding to put Kaboli's professional and complete version of the poem in the footnote and leave mine in the text. This was due to the way I had related to some of the words, as if they said something in their appearance and sound, not their mere meaning that felt to somewhat more closely capture Shamloo's tone. The following is Kaboli's version (<http://www.shamlu.com>).

The unknowing
 are alike
 only the tempest
 bears peerless children.
 Those alike
 are as shadows
 prudent
 on the edges of sunshine
 in the guise of the living
 they are dead.
 And these
 staring danger in the face
 are guardians of fire
 the living
 marching beside death
 ahead of death
 always alive even after traversing death
 and always bearing the name
 with which they lived
 for decay
 passes beneath the tall threshold of their memory
 hunched and shamefaced.
 Discoverers of the fountainhead
 humble discoverers of the hemlock
 pursuing joy
 in the mouth of the volcanoes
 magicians of smiles in the hats of pain
 with footprints deeper than joy
 on the paths of birds.
 They face the thunder
 enlighten the house
 and die.

For annihilation passes them by, ashamed and mortified
 These are the humble discoverers of hemlock
 The seekers of joy in the censer of the volcano
 The magicians of smiles in the night hat of pain
 They stand against thunder,
 illuminate the house
 And
 Die!⁸⁵ ..

Happenings, Events, and Metaphors

Dated 1965, the above poem titled “Funeral Oration” by Ahmad Shamlou, a contemporary Iranian poet, exemplified the reverence and the gratitude of the Iranian intellectuals for the self sacrifices of the leftists,⁸⁶ who were killed by the Shah’s Regime. The poem became a metaphor for the martyred dissidents and was known by heart by a generation of young educated, middle-class Iranians of the era. Yet my main intention in opening this chapter with this poem is neither to demonstrate its exceptional poetic

⁸⁵ Ghāfelān Hamsāzand
 Tanhā Tofān Kodakān-e- nāhamgoon mizāyad
 Hamsāz sāayeh sānānad
 Mohtāt dar marzhāye āftāb
 Dar heiate mordegān zendegānand
 Vinān del beh daryā afkanānand
 Bar pāy dārendaye ātashhā
 Zendegāni pishāpish-e-marg
 Hamāreh zende bedān nām keh zisteh bodand
 Keh tabāhi az dargāh-e-bolande khātereshān
 Sharmsār o sarafkandeh migozarad
 Kashefān forotan-e-sokarān
 Joyandegān-e-shādi dar mejmare ātashfeshān
 Sobadehbāzān-e-labkhand
 Dar shabkolāh-e-dard
 Dar barābar e tondar mi istand
 Khāneh rā rooshan mikonand
 Va mimirand...”(Shamlou)

⁸⁶ I use these categories, the left, the religious, and the secular, for lack of better terms. These categories do not of course convey great diversities within or similarities between them. One needs to see these terms as more relational than categorical, especially in recent years. Even as early as late 1950s, Toudch party was not perceived as a leftist organization by most leftist groups in Iran. In fact, as I include them among the left I already envision the negative reactions of some of my leftist friends. Due to the near demise of an organized Marxist left in Iran, these terms have nowadays become trendy among religious fractions who used them to categorize each other as the left, center, right, and so on.

quality nor its expression of reverence for the executed dissidents. Rather, I want to emphasize two underlying subtle aspects of this poem: its role in turning a “happening” into an “event” and its conversion into a metaphor which failed to move beyond its cultural class boundaries.⁸⁷ In differentiating between a happening and an event, to some extent, I agree with Allen Feldman who, writing about violence in Northern Ireland, asserts that “event is not what happens,” but “that which can be narrated”⁸⁸ (Feldman, 1991: 14). I nevertheless remain wary of the risk of undermining the undeniable force of action and its potential role as a form of speech, as well as the risk of silencing the voices of the marginalized. Having said this, I venture to suggest that, in order for an event to turn into a historically significant phenomenon capable of influencing future events, the circumstances and the modes of narration are as essential as, if not more than, its narration.

In this chapter I compare the happenings of two distinctive historical moments and locations, that of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his companions in “Karbala” in the seventh Century and of the martyrdom of a group of leftist guerrillas in “Siyahkal” in 1960, to demonstrate how they became events of particular impact in the recent history of Iran, most specifically in the Revolution of 1979. I will attempt to show that not by

⁸⁷ By cultural class I am referring to a class identification that is not entirely related to the economic status of its individuals. In the rapidly changing society of Iran, especially during the 1960s and 1970s, it was not exceptional for the children of the lower class, even from rural areas, to enter free public universities and become successful professionals, or belong to the economically lower classes but see themselves as culturally middle-class, on the basis of their education and claim to a culturally higher status.

⁸⁸ Feldman’s claim might be read in a way that could entail the risk of silencing those actions and experiences which do not find venues to verbal narrations. Such reading runs into two problems: it does not perceive happenings as a different kind of articulation and narration, and it reduces the events to narration and texts. I, nevertheless, read this statement in a less totalizing and conclusive manner, as a relative historical reality. The fact that particular incidents become historical events while others do not find their way into history does not mean that they have no effect on the way history is made; but rather their effects remain subtle and singular, similar to de Certeau’s notion of “acts of walking” (1984). One nevertheless cannot deny the fact that some events, like that of Karbala, do not merely enter history, but become essential to its writing.

their mere narration but rather through the divergent modes and scope of their narration, they came to signify and provoke subsequent events and effects.

Amongst a variety of ways by which the incident of Karbala grew into a mytho-historical event, I herein concentrate on a single mode, though, in my view it is an all-encompassing one. This is the *shabih khāni*⁸⁹ which literally means “reading similar” and refers to a religious semi-theatrical ritual commemoration of the Karbala martyrs.

Similarly, I have chosen Shamlou’s poem as a form of expression by which the incident of Siyahkal became a mytho-historical event, out of and among many other means, such as its survivors’ trial defense and the underground publications of the organization. As with Karbala, the archetype of Shi’i martyrdom which at once evoked and impeded other possibilities, Siyahkal became a momentous event for the Iranian left, in relation to which different movements were evaluated. I have employed *shabih khāni* and Shamlou’s poem as the respective metaphors of the Iranian religious and secular-leftist revolutionaries because their correlation with one another and with recent Iranian history mirror and reflect the relationship of these groups to the 1979 Revolution.

Yet, such a comparison between the poem of a left-leaning poet⁹⁰ and a religious semi-theatrical ritual is not immediately self-evident. What points of convergence, one could very well ask, are there between these two historically and contextually different phenomena? How do they relate to the Revolution of 1979 and its ensuing events and to the families of the state and dissident martyrs? Throughout this chapter, as we revisit the

⁸⁹ I use the term *shabih khāni*, while scholars have often either referred to it as *t`aziyeh khāni* or “passion play” (Beeman, 1979, 1982; Chelckowski, 1979; Mottahedeh, 1985; Aghayee, 2004 and many others). I have chosen “*shabih khāni*,” because it was used to refer to this commemorative ritual when I was growing up and because most people in Iran still commonly speak of it as *shabih khāni*.

⁹⁰ Except for a brief period of his affiliation with Tudeh party, which he ended after the Coup of 1953, Shamlou never directly identified himself as a leftist. He was however commonly seen as a leftist, which he did not deny either.

trajectories of the 1979 Revolution, these questions will be tackled and untangled. The occasional moving out and beyond these metaphors makes it evident that the means by which the two aforementioned incidents are turned into events are not reducible to the *shabih khāni* and the poem. Nor do these metaphors encompass the complexities and the dialectical relationships between and within these sociopolitical groups, the people, and the Revolution. As metaphors, however, they facilitate the task of translating a complex phenomenon, the Revolution of 1979, into language.⁹¹

I should therefore note that while the events of Karbala and Siyahkal have both been turning points in the history of Shi'ism and the revolutionary leftist movement in Iran, respectively, and have had a much broader sociopolitical impact on the movement at large, the deployment of Shamloo's poem and *shabih khāni* as metaphors is a personal choice on my part. Like any metaphor, these two also entail their own limitations, solidifying effects, and problematics. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, I believe that they reveal more about the recent Iranians history than they conceal. In addition to the significance of *shabih khāni* in foreshadowing Shamloos' poem, and the influence of Shamloo's poem on the language and culture of the revolutionaries, including the religious groups, two points are worth mentioning here. One is that the poem is still recited by members of the left, sometimes even by secular or reformist religious activists, on the occasion of the execution of the dissidents and their anniversaries, testifying to its importance as an enduringly appealing metaphor.⁹² And yet, the fact that the left lacked a

⁹¹ The particular course of events leading to the Revolution of 1979 and its outcome have been the topic of numerous scholarly works (Abrahamian, 1982; Arjomand, 1984; Beeman, 1982; Dabashi, 2001, 2007; Fischer, 1990; Keddi, 1980; Kurzman, 2004; Mottahedeh, 1985; Talattoff 2000).

⁹² An interesting transformation that I witnessed during my fieldwork had to do with the way a group of young men and women born after the Revolution recited Shamloo's poetry on his grave, either collectively or each reciting a few verses and another person continuing on. This was a unique and new way of reciting

single far-reaching popular metaphor, a historically rooted one such as *shabih khāni* demarcates a reality with critical consequences.⁹³ Rather than trying to explain the cause of the victory of the Islamic leaders in the Revolution of 1979 by a Marxian notion of “false consciousness,” one ought to explore the kinds of mechanisms and dynamics that led to such a result.

The interrelated ideas that I hope to substantiate in this chapter are thus twofold. Firstly, I argue that the turn of events of the Revolution of 1979 was less reliant on what really happened than on how what happened came to be represented. The decisive factor of this representation, I suggest, had to do with the ways in which these metaphors were able to effectively utilize modern technologies and techniques in relating to the masses. I propose that their fate was determined by their ability, albeit within their particular sociopolitical and cultural context, to create a simultaneous sense of distance and proximity, familiarity and novelty, and uniqueness as well as ordinariness, both with an imaginary origin recognized by the masses. My aim in juxtaposing Shamlou’s poem and *shabih khāni* is not so much to emphasize their differences than to examine the complex

modern poetry in Iran, similar to singing a song or a revolutionary hymn, or even revolutionary chants that often take place as a collective performance. In its performative manner of recitation, it also resembled “shabih khāni” and “Naghghāli.” The latter is a traditional epical form of performative story telling that is accompanied with paintings and drawings shown on a wall or a white curtain.

⁹³ It is true that there were poems which were more accessible to people both in their literary and symbolic language, and their dissemination. For example, a poem by a leftist poet, Siavash Kasrayee, about a legendary mythical hero, “Arash-e- Kamangir,” (Arash, the archer) found its way into the text books and was thus known by literate Iranians of the era (1959). While this poem also emphasized the conscious and courageous act of self-sacrifice, it did not signify people’s betrayal as in Karbala, nor did it concentrate on people’s failing to support their leaders as does Siyahkal. Rather, Arash was a symbol of the best of a nation, a single sacrifice that encompasses all the energy and dream of the collective. The fate of the dispute over the boundaries of Iran and its mythical enemy Turan, fails to be decided by the war, and is left to the skilled bowmen of each country. To expand the territories of Iran, Arash consciously decides to throw his arrow to the farthest possible distance. This however means to use so much force that he would inevitably throw himself along with the arrow. While throwing his body along with his bow, Arash flies down from the top of the mountain. As his arrow horizontally moves on the sky, expanding the horizons of his country, his body flies down towards the earth and is torn into pieces.

ways in which they incorporated, influenced, and redefined one another. I want to show how these metaphors related to the world and the particular sociopolitical conditions out of which the Islamic Republic emerged victorious.⁹⁴

The Children of Storm and Self-sacrifice

Both *shabih khāni* and Shamlou's poem were born out of and reflected injustice, death, murder, and self-sacrifice. Yet, like all mothers who, in their children's reflection, are born anew, both *shabih khāni* and the poem recreated the events out of which they had emerged. *Shabih khāni* is an annual reenactment of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and a small group of his companions in an uneven battle with the troops of Yazid, the Caliph of the time, in the desert of Karbala. As a complex theatrical-ritual drama, it combines several artistic forms together, from poetry recitation, singing, religious eulogy, rhetoric, acting, to music, and much more.⁹⁵ Prior to the 1979 Revolution, year after year, as its literal meaning "reading, reciting or singing similar" suggested, *shabih khāni* offered similar yet always new reenactments of the Karbala event. These "performances" brought the majority of Iranians together, not only in grief and anger against tyranny but in shame for the silence with which the people of Kufeh had allowed the massacre to take place.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Upon its emergence, the religious founders of this Regime muddled together the monarchists, the nationalists, and the secular left, regardless of their ideological differences and animosity towards one another. Dissidents were all labeled as "Mostakbarin" (oppressive) and "tāghooti" (idolatrous), the enemies of God, the Islamic Republic, and the dispossessed (mustaz'afin).

⁹⁵ For a detailed and diverse reading of T'aziyeh khani (*shabih khāni*) see Peter Chelkowski's edited book (1979). For an artistic reading of this commemorative ritual and its fusion with the "pre-Islamic" Siyavashoon—which is the ritual of mourning Siyavash, a legendary pre-Islamic martyr, see Daneshvar's beautiful novel, *Suvashun*.

⁹⁶ Today Karbala, now located in Iraq, has once again become, both metaphorically and in actuality, a space of murder and martyrdom.

Shamloo's poem also was a eulogy to the self-sacrifices and massacre of a small group of leftist guerrillas by the Shah's Regime in 1960 in the thinning woods near the little town of Siyahkal. As a text, it too was reproduced anew in every reading, and was often recited in commemorating the death of the leftist dissidents. It also, like all masterpieces of Iranian poetry, incorporated elements of performing and visual art, including music, rhetoric, painting, recitation, imaginary theatricality, and even religious aesthetic traditions. In fact, the remarkable similitude to *shabih khāni* that haunts Shamloo's poem is not merely limited to its imageries or themes, but also to its aesthetics and theatrical characteristics, its performative and visual qualities. As one reads the poem, a dramatic performance begins to unfold in one's imagination.

Hamid Dabashi attributes the poetic quality of Iranian cinema to the text-central Islamic culture (2001). I would, however, like to point out the incredible visual imageries and acoustic rhythms that are invoked in Iranian poetry, so much so that it is often hard not to paint a picture in the mind, or not to hear its music while reading a poem. In *shabih khāni* and Shamloo's poem as well, all the senses are called for, each substituting and supplementing one another. "The forming of the five senses" which, in Marx's words, "is a labour of the entire history down to the present"⁹⁷ is magnificently reflected in the nature of artistic production in Iran, in general, and in *shabih khāni* and Shamloo's poem, in particular.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ *Economics and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1948.*

⁹⁸ In Rumi's poetry for instance, one sees the leaves clapping, hears their music, and feels the touch of the cool breeze on one's face.

And yet the distinction between the poem as a text and *shabih khāni* as a theatrical performance, is one of the essential differences between them.⁹⁹ This distinction has partially to do with the “ocularcentric and “hegemonic characteristic of vision” in modernity which, according to David Michael Levin, works as a means of domination (1999).¹⁰⁰ Although Levin’s focus is more on the relationship between the power of vision and the vision of power and their impact on the epistemology and the metaphysics of the West, I would expand his idea to the world of the commodity which deems eyes the essence of humanity. It is not so much that one believes the eyes, but rather that one’s visual imagination of a text is so deeply shaped by one’s visual memory and past imageries. Living in the word of language, nevertheless, as Derrida reminds us, binds our visual imagination, always already, to language and text. In this sense, while *shabih khāni* seems to limit the imagination by displaying a particular reality to the eye, the poem appears to allow the mind to take its flight in unlimited imaginings. Yet, both the poem and *shabih khāni* offer divergent possibilities of visualization and reading as well as their limitations, expanded or curtailed by a variety of factors.

In multifarious ways, both the metaphors, *shabih khāni*¹⁰¹ and the poem, echoed the temperament and the pulsation of Iranian society between the US planned and sponsored 1953 Coup, which overthrew Mosaddegh and reinstalled the Shah’s Regime,

⁹⁹ Hamid Dabashi argues that the Iranian-Islamic culture is text-centered because image making is forbidden in Islam (2001). This taboo has however not diminished the importance of vision and desire for image making. More importantly, I would suggest that modernity has given visual media a new power and role of which the Islamic Republic’s utilization of visual media is exemplary.

¹⁰⁰ “Keeping Derrida and Foucault in Sight: Panopticism and the Politics of Subversion” in *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy* 1999. ed. David Michael Levin. Pp. 397-467.

¹⁰¹ It is important to mention that not only has *shabih khāni* gone through many metamorphoses but also it can be read in many ways. Its dominant dissident reading, since 1960, emphasized more its revolutionary spirit.

and the beginning of the Revolutionary uprisings in 1979. The ambiance of this period was generally described by the religious and leftist revolutionaries as the confrontation of a small group of courageous, self-sacrificing individuals with a regime of tyranny. The majority of people were portrayed, if not as traitors or apathetic groups of cowardly and complacently oppressed people, at best as passive spectators of individual sacrifices. In both incidents of Karbala and Siyahkal, the people whose support the protagonists had hoped for did not deliver.¹⁰²

The aim of these narrations was as much, if not essentially, about putting this majority to shame and thereby moving them into action as about commemorating the dead or condemning injustice. Thus while both *shabih khāni* and the poem seemed to emphasize the battle between a minority and an unjust regime, what was really at stake was the goal of mobilizing this very majority that was depicted as insignificant or significantly absent. I am here mainly concerned with the extent to which Shamloo's poem and *shabih khāni* reached this majority, and the hows and whys of this address.

Until the Revolution, due to the censorship of the Shah's Regime neither the particular event of Siyahkal nor the names of those martyred found their way into the

¹⁰² As with Jesus whose sacrifice has been read both as a way of salvaging and putting people to shame, Imam Hussein's story of martyrdom is also told as an exemplary act which offers a possibility of redemption for future generations and a constant reminder of the "shameful" failure of people to stand behind their self-sacrificing leaders. According to the Karbala story, the people of Kufeh invited him to their town with the promise to offer their support but, intimidated by the Caliph, Yazid, they failed to deliver. Surrounded by the troops of Yazid, Imam Hussein and his male companions fought an uneven battle and were killed. Their survivors, women, children, and the ailing Imam were taken captive. Like all other wars, however, here too casualties were inevitable. The six month old Ali Asghar's death has been mourned as a sign of the extreme cruelty of Yazid's troops that exceeds the norms of wars. Similarly, the Leftist guerrillas, who chose Siyahkal as the location of their first action against the state, had somewhat relied on two main factors: firstly, on the possibility of hiding in the thick embrace of the forest which proved disappointing due to the Shah Regime's extreme deforestation projects; and secondly, on the leftist leaning of the people of the north, which also turned out to be an illusion. Since the 60th, the emphasis of both stories was on the impact of the self-sacrificing acts of a small group of righteous individuals. If for Imam Hussein it was Islam that called for self-sacrifice, for this group of leftists, as one of their leaders, Parviz Pouyan, argued, it was the act of the little engine, the leaders, which was to ignite the large engine, the revolution and the people.

printed version of the Shamloo's poem.¹⁰³ Consequently, unlike the Karbala Event which was constantly re-called, revived, and reborn as a metatext and metaphor for other occasions, the event of Siyahkal in Shamloo's poem reiterated the themes of martyrdom and self-sacrifice while its concealment in the poem deprived it of singularity. The metaphor of Karbala named other events and was re-imagined by them, always possessing its distinguished singularity. Siyahkal, on the other hand, became an already-generalized metaphor, which in the absence of specific names lent itself to incorporation and subordination to the meta-historical event of Karbala, and offered it yet another referent and reenactment, "*shabih khāni*."¹⁰⁴ Known and whispered in the small circle of dissident intellectuals, Siyahkal's characters, however, turned into descriptive metaphors, abstracted and generalized in the "children of storm" and the "discoverers of hemlock."¹⁰⁵

External Blocks, Internal Potentials

"They are the living ahead of death ...for annihilation passes them by, ashamed and mortified," so wrote Shamloo, against the death, amnesia, and stigmatization that the

¹⁰³ Censorship was of course soon taken up by the new Regime, under which Shamloo's new poems were never published in Iran and the old books were often banned, though one often got hold of their older versions. But the short period of revelation of the event which was mentioned in the beginning of the poem as "for the Siyahkal Epic" had already spilled the beads; the private secret had become a public secrecy.

¹⁰⁴ This has in fact been a common trend of the Islamic Republic. For example, during the early years ensuing the Revolution of 1979, the television never broadcasted the revolutionary song that was known to be written by Karamat Daneshiyan, a well know leftist dissident who was executed by the Shah's Regime. This song was sung by the leftists in the Iranian New Year. In the last few years, however, the song has been played on television and radio, without even mentioning its source. It has now become possible for the state to incorporate the song and use it towards its own agenda, for the young generation no longer knows of its leftist history.

¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, one can trace this qualitative difference between the religious and leftists individuals' relations to names in the way they name their children. A great many of the leftists chose metaphorical names for their children- such names as Tofan (Storm), Shooresh (uprising), Sahar and Sepideh (both mean dawn) and so on. Their religious counterparts named their children Hussein, Ali, Mahdi and so on.

Shah's regime attempted to impose on dissidents.¹⁰⁶ Through these words, he delivered the struggle and the sacrificial death of a group of leftists into history. To make present the imposed absence of the names of his heroes, his sublime expression spoke of them as those "always alive by the same name they had lived." This invisible haunting presence mystified the heroes and the event, and rendered them attractive to the underground political culture as well as available for a wide range of appropriations.¹⁰⁷

Shamloo's poem resonated with the Iranians who lived before and participated in the Revolution of 1979, at least partially, because it echoed, if not emulated, the spirit of "Karbala" and *shabih khani*. His depiction of people walking "cautiously on the borders of the sun" resembled the image of the "cowardly" Kufee people in Karbala narratives. Like Karbala martyrs, the protagonists of the poem died to "illuminate the house" for the "silent," "shadowy" people. Like Imam Hussein's blood that was to be spread around the entire history to mobilize the oppressed of all times and places against oppressors, as Ali Shari'ati suggested, the self-sacrificing act of Shamloo's "children of the storm," was to act like Foucault's flash of lightening, which reveals the stark darkness by the very

¹⁰⁶ The Shah's Regime, like any other state, was as much at work to impose silence on its dissidents as to magnify their threats as trouble makers and the enemies of the nation. This ambivalent task also contributed to the production of an abstract, faceless, nameless, and metaphoric enemy. Color became the element of distinguishing the boundaries of friends and enemies. Against the "White Revolution," which was to symbolize the state's progressive character, the enemies of the state were red and black Reactionaries, referring to communists and Islamists, respectively.

¹⁰⁷ In an interesting uncanny coincidence with this idea, Shamloo's another poem, which was called "Nazli Did Not Speak" had a strange story regarding the names. Due to the censorship, the poem which was written by Shamloo as a tribute to and in honor of the execution of an Armenian-Iranian Toudeh Party member, Vartan Avanesian, was disguised under an Azarian female name, Nazli, which ironically meant coquettish. In the brief period of the so called "Spring of Freedom," made possible by 1979 Revolution, Shamloo revealed in whose honor his poem was written. Yet, years later, when more secrets were revealed, and Shamloo, as others, learned about the violent dealing with internal conflicts within the Toudeh Party and the accounts of Vartan's role in them, Shamloo took back the singular name and returned the poem to its "original" disguise, Nazli, no longer referring to Vartan but to the "true heroes." In Shamloo's new definition a true heroism did not simply mean fighting the oppressor but also the means and characteristics of one's fighting.

momentary flashing. Their fiery self-sacrificial act was to further expose the darkness of the social condition and therefore the necessity of changing it. Shamloo's portrayal of the people as the "embodiment of the dead" was echoed in Ali Shari'ati's speech on the occasion of the execution of a group of young Mojahedin by the Shah's Regime. In his *shabih khāni*, he employed the commemoration of the *shuhada* (martyrs) of Karbala as a pretext to speak of the recent martyrs.

Sisters and Brothers! The *shuhada* are now dead, and we—the dead—are alive. The *shuhada* have conveyed their message and we—the deaf—are their audience. Those who were bold enough to choose death, when they could no longer live, have left; we—the shameless—have remained. We have remained for hundreds of years. It is quite appropriate for the whole world to laugh at us, because we, the symbols of abjection and humanity, are weeping for Hussayn and Zaynab, the manifestation of life and honor. This is another injustice of history: that we—the despicable—should be the mourners of these mighty ones. Today the *shuhada* delivered their message with their blood and sat opposite us in order to invite the seated ones of history to rise ("From After Shahadat" cited in Fischer and Abedi: 1990: 219).

That people are depicted as "despicable" and "shadowy," in Shari'ati's *shabih khāni* (similar reading) of Karbala and in Shamloo's poem, is indicative of the sociopolitical condition within and out of which these metaphors emerged. What was the condition that if not changed, even at the cost of one's life, turned one into the "embodiment of the dead," to the "despicable," shameless living? What kind of demands were made of subjects and their lives according to which the mere fact of being alive made them into symbols of "abjection" and "humanity," at whom the world could laugh? What kinds of dis-identification with the people did these two views insinuate, with what implications? Against what ideal form of being-in-the-world was this "humanity" defined as undeserving to even mourn the martyrs? Is this the "humanity" that Rumi

compares to a blindfolded donkey (khar-e- hammār) that aimlessly walks in circles?¹⁰⁸ Is this condition of “humanity” similar to Agamben’s notion of bare life, or that to which Shari`ati refers as a state of one’s complicit enslavement by the oppressor? Does this “humanity” mean one’s submission to the desires of the “inferior material world” (donya-ye past-maddi”) or one’s “lascivious spirit” (nafs-e-ammareh) against which, according to religious leaders, the respective minor and major forms of Jihad or religious struggle (jahād-e-asghar va jahād-e-akbar) are mandatory?

Yet, as the social conditions were far too complex to be reduced to simple categories, so were the perceptions of the ways out of it. While the radical left and religious intellectuals shared many similar values, including their ideas of self-sacrifice and meaningful life, significant differences distinguished them. These differences did not merely concern the ideal model into which they envisioned Iranians being refashioned, but, and more importantly, the means by which this refashioning was to be materialized. Shamloo’s poem and *shabih khāni* conveyed these differences. In *shabih khāni*, it is the supernatural divinity of Imam Hussein as a saint which enables his beheaded head to speak. The heroes of Shamloo’s poem however, are magicians who miraculously “smile in the night-cap of pain.” The former claims the power of the divine while the later relies on skill, tricks, and techniques.

Enlightenment emerged with the claim of putting an end to the idea of the supernatural, only to give it a new force through science and technology. With the advance of media technology, everyone could now become a magician, or the spectator of magic. One could now sit in one’s cozy room in front of a TV set and momentarily

¹⁰⁸ In fact, this metaphor was used by Islamic leaders, including Ayat-ullah Montazeri, again and again during the early years of the Islamic Republic to refer to people who did not follow Islam and Khomeini’s path.

cry for others' suffering and by a simple change of channel switch into loud laughter.

While Shamloo's poem still relied on the omnipotence of modern science to improve the magician's skills, modern religiosity utilized science and technology to portray powerful magicians as divine. On television, the beheaded head of Imam Hussein could speak, looking more magical and realistic at once. As vampires and ghosts have become everyday realities on television, magicians' tricks were also transformed into miracles in modern *shabih khāni*. As the camera had allowed for different temporal and spatial realities to appear in the here and now, in the new *shabih khāni* too, the Iranians of the 1960s embodied the Kufee people who, in Shari'ati's words, "have remained alive for hundreds of years."

While Shamloo's poem had to rely on the metaphors of shadows and sun to express a sense of the eternal existence of its heroes, *shabih khāni* turned the metaphor into reality by bringing the characters of the past onto the stage of the present. The signifier became the signified. Through modern science and technology, the characters from the past came back to life to deny the omnipotence of the very science and technology that had made their "return" possible. This was in line with Khomeini's return to Iran on the shoulders of the very people he declared "he had come to make into human species" (*ādam*). Here lies the power of the metaphor of the religious clergy. Like *shabih khāni*, the revolutionaries assembled all irrelevant elements towards their version of revolution, while dismissing their singularities. Through *shabih khāni* (both as similar reading and as reenactment), Khomeini integrated many of the leftists' views, utilized the Toudeh party's hostility towards other dissident views to crush them, and employed nationalists to build the Regime, while eliminating them one by one, mainly by

using one against another. Khomeini's *shabih khāni* re-narrated the story of creation and early Shi'ism materialized in a modern revolution. Shamloo's poem related to a more recent history but remained abstract.

Contained Storm?

While Shamloo's poem expanded the incident of Siyahkal beyond itself through poetic articulation, thereby transforming it into a meta-historical event, its textual quality and its very literary language ironically prevented it from reaching the subalterns,¹⁰⁹ who were to be the main concern of the left in their pursuit of social justice.¹¹⁰ In "failing" to reach out and beyond its circle, the poem fell short of achieving its purpose of "illuminating the house" through the event and the metaphor of death and self-sacrifice.

¹¹¹ Censorship also deprived it of going further, in the specificity of its happening and its

¹⁰⁹ In using the term "subaltern," I remain wary of the problematics which Spivak points out, in her criticism of the postcolonial subaltern studies in her essay "Can the Subaltern speak" (1988). According to Spivak, speaking of and for a collective single subaltern ignores their heterogeneity and denies them their voice. I am nevertheless employing subaltern in relation to the leftists' notion of *khalgh*, and *toudeh*, and the religious leaders' later invented term, *mostazafin*, all of which, somewhat in line with Gramsci's usage of this term as the economically dispossessed, referred to lower classes who were to constitute the revolutionary masses.

¹¹⁰ By suggesting the victory of *shabih khāni* over the poem, I am not reiterating the dominant Enlightenment view about the "relative value of the senses," which as Charles Hirschkind notes, argues for the "superiority of vision over hearing." (2006: 13). My concern here is not so much about textuality versus visuality, or the hierarchy of one sense over another. Rather I am contemplating the accessibility of one form of communication, a particular kind of poetry vis-à-vis a form of theatrical embodied practice that has been engraved in the social consciousness of the people, as always familiar and yet transforming phenomenon with the ability to access a wide range of people. My concern here thus has to do with the issue of collective memory, on the one hand, and the question of language as a class-based social and ideological means of expression and communication, on the other. Even when Shamloo's poetry was disseminated in cassette form, it was not comprehended by the lay, even average educated audience. It rather required trained intellectuals of often middle class background.

¹¹¹ To claim that the poem failed to reach the subaltern is not to suggest that the poet had necessarily intentionally engaged in such a battle, and seeking political end. Shamloo is known for the complexity of his language, which was not even accessible to an average educated reader (1968). In fact he blamed the laziness of the reader, whom he called the bad readers, for failing or not willing to comprehend complex ideas and expressions. One has to be familiar with Shamloo's inventory of metaphors and symbolic references and his philosophical views to decipher his poetry. Even though the poems such as the one we discuss here were more intended for a broader audience, Shamloo knew that the majority of Iranians could not and did not read. I am building my argument not based on the intention of the author, to whom I do great injustice by imposing this reading of his poem, but the role of his artistic production in relation to the events leading to the Revolution of 1979.

dissemination. A little column of the newspaper which briefly mentioned the poem as a defeated attempt of “sabotaging groups” (gorooh-hāye-kharābkār), if seen, was buried in the memories by the news of the day after, except for those already anticipating it. It therefore lost the battle of metaphors, which were the essential weapons with which the Revolution of 1979 was fought by different parties, the left, the nationalists, and the Islamic leaders, against the Shah and for the new regimes of power.

In its inability to reach the subaltern, Shamlou’s poem exemplified the semi-elite, middle class, leftist intellectuals whose very failure to reach people and deliver their view of utopian justice led to their subordination by the religious leaders of the Revolution of 1979. *Shabih khāni*, on the other hand, as the product of the subordinate which was utilized and co-opted by the religious elite to represent the voice of the subaltern, found popular ground. It emerged, if momentarily, as the unified voice of the new state and the revolutionary populace. Against this unity, a homogenous other was defined as the anti-revolutionary. Homa, a former leftist inmate and the wife of an executed dissident, describes this rapid transition in her personal experience of a 1980 sit-in at a pharmaceutical factory:

I’ll never forget how after days and nights of sitting, eating, sleeping alongside the workers, suddenly all that which was solid began to melt away.¹¹² That deep closeness and trust we had built with them seemed to evaporate as a “cleric” (ākhund) appeared there and preached to them about the danger of communists among us. He said communists were trying to draw people away from God and Imam Khomeini. This was the difference between us and these religious leaders. As long as we talked about social justice, the workers loved us but we could almost never dare to directly say we were communists. The religious clergy, on the other hand, could simply incorporate our ideas of social justice and offer them as God’s words. And then they had the workers on their side, while supporting

¹¹² As many leftists in Iran, she borrowed her phrase from Marx.

capitalism. Of course I am simplifying this whole thing. Things were not so simple, so black and white. But you know what I mean?

As Homa remarks, as if responding to my non-verbal expression of confusion, “things were not so simple.” Neither categories, nor events and metaphors are static entities, outside of their specific historical milieu.¹¹³ Nor do I simply reiterate the view that the language of the clergy succeeded in reaching the masses because it imitated *shabih khāni*. I rather argue that the very idea of the mass itself was reformulated in a peculiar way which generated its unique appeal. It is my contention that this transfiguration could not have had happened outside of a mass-mediated world which has not only transformed our relationship to our senses but also our sensualities.¹¹⁴ Modern *shabih khāni* came to utilize, dismiss, and overpower other metaphors, including Shamloo’s poem, by a reading similar to the original, which could have been seen as *passé* had it not been for its innovative resurrection by modern technologies.

Furthermore, and mainly for this very reason, I suggest that this battle has not necessarily ended with the victory of the Revolution of 1979. Far from final, it rather continues to affect and haunt not only the lives of the participants of the Revolution, but is being perpetuated in new ways and with new dynamics targeting younger generations. The current situation in Iran, in the election of Mahmood Ahmadinezhad as president, on

¹¹³ I am not hereby referring to the class as its precise Marxist definition, in relation of to the means of production and consciousness. I am rather speaking of class in a more general sense of lower class, higher class which often is concerned with income and assets. Yet, as such, class as a category is too general. What does it mean to speak of the lower class? Does it refer to a particular standard of income? But then, can one speak of the rural and the urban lower class in the same vein? What about a lower class student in a neighborhood in Tehran where he or she has access to internet and the one in a remote village who does not? What about a lower class person from Qom and the other from Rasht in the north of Iran? Class itself, therefore, infers a complex range of variables, of which religious inclinations, cultural practices, and educational status, are inseparable.

¹¹⁴ For an interesting discussion of senses and sensualities, see Charles Hirschkind, 2006.

the one hand, and the event of the students' protest against his presence at the Polytechnic University on December 11, 2006, on University Student Day,¹¹⁵ on the other, both manifest the continuity and the power of the battle of metaphors.¹¹⁶

Also in 2006, in a "metaphoric" incident coinciding with the burial of state martyrs within the Sharif University grounds, Shamloo's tombstone was shattered for the third time since his death in 2000. In the similar treatment of Shamloo's grave and of those executed dissidents, the continuity of the relationship between the metaphor and the left is re-emphasized. If in post-revolutionary Iran, dissident and state martyrs symbolized the boundaries within which the normal citizenry was constantly reconfigured, these two metaphors also characterized and narrated a story of marginality and normalcy. Before the revolution, dissidents of the regime generally emphasized their

¹¹⁵ The origin of the University Student Day goes back to the killing of three leftist University students in Iran in 1953, during a protest against the then Vice-President Richard Nixon's visit to Iran, immediately following the American coup of 1953. Every year since then, this day has been remembered by acts of protest. While the Islamic Republic preferred and tried to replace this day by a different day and occasion, it was unable to eliminate it. It thus attempted to re-channel and utilize it against its external and internal enemies. While in the early years following the Revolution it was quite successful in using the student body to voice its political agenda towards both goals, in the last few years the student movement has become once again more about dissidence. This does not mean that the students have been a homogenous body of either opposition against or support for the regime. The physical violence between two groups of students, in Polytechnic in 2006, in support of and opposition to Ahmadinezhad's presence in the University is only one example among many of this heterogeneity.

¹¹⁶ In fact the events of December 11, 2006 at the Polytechnic University (Amir Kabir University) which coincided with the College Student Day (Rooz-e-Dāneshjoo) is a great example of the continuity, transformation, and manipulation of this battle of metaphors, especially that of *shabih khāni*. In this day, while the students opposing Ahmadinezhad's visit of the University chanted against him, he somewhat jokingly used a chant against these students from the revolutionary era, while utterly reversing its context. He shouted "toop, tānk, mosalsal digar asar nadārad" (artillery, tank, and machine guns no longer have any effects). During the 1979 Revolution, this chant was shouted by the students and the people, in general, against the Shah Regime. Ahmadi nezhad's usage of this chant against students who were calling him a dictator was to return this accusation back to the students and thus place himself and the state in the position of the fighter resisting the oppression. Subsequently, dissident students were portrayed as the oppressor. This ironic set up was made possible by coalescing, once again, the US hostility towards Iranian state with any internal dissidence. This chant implicitly reinforced the state accession that all opposition movements in Iran are related with and at the service of the US. This creative *shabih khāni* was to turn the protest against itself and legitimize his position as the real follower of revolutionary ideas.

shared goal of overthrowing the Shah. The inception of the Islamic Republic, however, stirred up hostility among these different parties of interests.

Mirroring this metamorphosis, the poem and *shabih khāni* have also drifted further apart from each other than they were before the Revolution, and yet they continue to influence and live on in each other in new forms. Like the graves of the dissident martyrs which invoke the abyss that allegedly awaits those who stray away from the path outlined by God, and the state that claimed to be his representative, the poem and its poet were also marginalized and forced into silence and isolation. The televised *shabih khāni* was represented as the united voice of the state and the mass, as if it was a grassroots *shabih khāni*. The trick was the difference between the earlier *shabih khāni* reenacted in villages and poor neighborhoods without the sense of a separate stage, spectators, and actors, and the modern televised, or staged *shabih khāni*, where the audience was demarcated as spectators.

The televised form of *shabih khāni* integrated textual elements of the poem and the visually performative forms of the grassroots *shabih khāni*, rendering it accessible to the entire nation. It was no longer a dispersed, singular and local embodied practice, but an abstract, state-manipulated form of rhetorical speech. This of course does not mean that, because of this very mass mediation, it was not multiplied, and in de Certeau's term, became a nomadic device that traveled in de-territorialized terrains or raid territories (1984). It rather meant that it created a different relationship between the performer and audience, the authority and the public. To decipher the dialectic of this transformation, we need to briefly glance over the conditions in which the two event-metaphors stood and out of which new events were envisaged and transpired.

Of Unfulfilled Dreams and Self-Sacrifices

The brief euphoria and the relative freedom of Mosaddegh's era were abruptly and brutally cut short by the bloody CIA-planned and sponsored *coup d'état* of 1953. The Shah returned to Iran and Mosaddegh was sentenced to a lifetime of house arrest. The Shah launched a crusade against leftist and religious dissidents as enemies of progress and the nation. This animosity towards the religious opponents and their suppression was overshadowed by his fear of the imminent threat of the "reds," which was particularly reinforced by the US. The mosques, the religious schools in Qom and Najaf continued to produce learned clergy while jails were crowded by those even suspected of being leftist.¹¹⁷

Seeking to avenge his forced exile, confident of the US support, and backed by the CIA and its advanced weapons, the Shah returned to install his regime as an "omnipotent" power within the country and the gendarme of the US in the region. The notorious SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, created a suffocating atmosphere for dissidents.¹¹⁸ In dissident poets' expression, an eclipse enveloped the country, bleak darkness and silence prevailed, and the night reigned supreme. Children born in the aftermath of 1953 felt the widespread disillusionment of their parents, a sense of collapse

¹¹⁷ This does not mean that religious intellectuals were not subjected to scrutiny, censorship, imprisonment, even killing by the Shah's Regime.

¹¹⁸ Combining effective technologies of intentionally wide spread rumors about SAVAK's brutality, which even exceeded its actual advanced and "barbaric" tools of torture, the secret police acquired its notorious reputation, a notoriety that itself was a technique of psychological torture by creating fear. As Taussig argues, in the creation of fear, rumors are as effective as the actual sources. They are both means of hegemonic powers to silence opposition and thus reign supreme (1999:70). Yet, this very result can of course be turned against itself when it exceeds its limit and becomes numbing. The notorious torturer of SAVAK, Hussein, was a case in point in the way rumor was used beyond its physical presence. The images of his notoriety were spread around, in addition to the words of mouth, through radio broadcasts in Iran's neighboring country which could be listened in Iran. Sometimes, SAVAK utilized the nefarious reputation of his name to intimidate the inmates by faking his presence or by threatening to give the take the inmates to him. Of course, many did not submit to their fear but there were times that, according to the inmates themselves, it worked.

of hope and trust in social change and in the leaders. Mrs. Ghayemi, a mother of three executed dissidents, articulated this mistrust in people by saying that “Iranians’ wisdom is in their eyes.”¹¹⁹ It was within and out of this ruinous landscape that new forces and metaphors were to emerge. As with visual media, all the senses would work together to bring about the changes for which one offers explanation only after the fact.

The Intersection Where the “Old” and the “New” Meet

As the Shah’s return proved to be the beginning of a new regime and a turn to a different country from that which he had been forced to leave, new dissidence too was no longer confined within the frames of the old parties or their views. The once-popular Toudeh Party had drastically lost its ground. A great many intellectuals, including artists such as Shamloo and Al-e-Ahmad ended their affiliation with it. The nationalists were seen as an ineffective political force, as the clergy was mistrusted for its predominantly conservative positions.¹²⁰ After the Shah’s return, the modernizing project begun by his father assumed greater momentum, as did the dependence of the Regime on a single foreign power, the United States. The new milieu was characterized by newly-facilitated transportation and therefore wider interactions between people of distant places, especially following the “White Revolution” of 1962. The significance of the “White Revolution,” was not merely its land reform, which ended up mainly by evacuating

¹¹⁹ While some “scholarly” works also suggest such views, one commonly hears them in everyday conversation among Iranians. These views are often not so clearly divided from one another. There are rather many overlaps between them. The recent debates about Islam and modernity in Iran by “reformists” vis-à-vis hardliners are evidence of such tensions and ambivalences. There are of course many more factors that complicate these multiplicities of identities. Most ethnic groups and languages in Iran, especially the Azeri and Arabic are reminders of other defeats to invasions, as the blond European looking people of the Northern provinces are suggested by some Iranians to offer a hint at the sexual violence that accompanied the long wars with the Ottoman Empire and Russians.

¹²⁰ It is important to mention that after 1953, the clerics were forced to praise the Shah and pray for him in public, including in their daily mosque sermons. Most of them submitted to this rule but there were those who did not and were deprived of their formal public roles. The dominant public image of the clergy was therefore that of submissive hypocrites.

villages of their inhabitants and creating waves of migration to cities and especially to Tehran. It led also to the sending of large groups of young high school graduates to the villages as “Education Corps (Sepah-e-Danesh) and “Health Corps” (Sepah-e-Behdasht) to provide literacy and modern hygienic training and health care to villagers. The two year mandatory stay in a village for these young men and women who were educated in the secular educational system was often a life-changing experience, more for them perhaps than for the villagers. Yet, for the villagers as well, the *mullas*, (the low-ranking clergy) were no longer the sole educators. Traditional healers were also losing ground to the insufficiently-provided new medicine.

The impact of the village project was far greater than its practical success in achieving its agenda. It exposed the villagers to new ways of seeing and being in the world that the urban youth represented.¹²¹ But more importantly, the villagers’ ambivalently familiar and unfamiliar life and beliefs often engendered a shocking experience for these youngsters, some of whom belonged to families who, following a common tendency among the middle-class urban population, denied their rural background. Being modern had grown synonymous with being urban. This idea had complicated effects on the way people related to their past and reminds one of Abraham and Torok’s notion of intergenerational memory, according to which one might inherit the guilt of the earlier generation, that of the parents for example, but the reason for this guilt might remain a mystery for the subject (1994).

¹²¹ For a detailed reading on the White Revolution and its myriad impacts including but not limited to economic and cultural see Amuzegar. 1991 *The Dynamics of the Iranian Revolution: The Pahlavi’s Triumph and Tragedy*, State University Press. It also offers statistics about the growth, income, unemployment in different periods of that era.

The question of this inheritance of guilt and responsibility as I have tried to show here is critical to the Karbala Narrative. But in this particular context of the families who deny their past to fit in the ideal of present, this issue is far more complex. The anxiety about fitting in with the norms of urbanity, which was particularly highlighted in the capital city, by speaking the official national language, Farsi, had resulted in some families' attempt to erase their accents, if not entirely forsake their mother tongue.¹²² For some of these young men and women, the experience of living in these villages therefore introduced not only new faces of life, but also entailed confronting complex suppressed emotions and memories. The cultural shock of being sent to a village in an unfamiliar area could prove remarkable even for those whose parents had ongoing relationships to their home villages.

Roghiyyeh was one of those young people for whom this experience proved to be life changing. A daughter of a low ranking *mullā* who deemed even radio “*harām*” (religiously unsanctioned), she grew up in a poor neighborhood in the south of Iran but went to school with children of diverse religious and cultural attitudes and upbringings.¹²³ In 2003, now a dynamic woman in her fifties, Roghiyyeh told me about those years and her service in the Health Corps:

My father was a real fanatic when it came to religious rules. We could not even listen to the radio. But I was very naughty [laughter emanates from her eyes and spreads on her face]. In our little town, we had only one or two high schools so I was going to school with girls who did not have enough to eat and those who went to Europe for

¹²² Children of many Azeri speaking families in Tehran took pride in not knowing how to speak Azeri.

¹²³ The irony of living in small towns was that because there were often limited schools the children of different class backgrounds ended up going to the same schools. This was unlike Tehran where schools were often divided based on class distinctions. There were of course exceptional cases, where a poor kid could end up in a private school because of academic excellence where she or he would be in contact mostly with rich upper class people. Although class was not determinative of cultural or religious inclinations, it was a significant element.

vacation, as though to the next city. Most girls were listening to music and going to movies. They would bring their little radio to school and we would dance to music together. So, I began feeling angry at my father's crazy and backward views. Soon, in one of the alleys around school, I was removing my chador and a layer of my uniform's skirt to make it shorter. I walked to school looking like most other girls, in miniskirt and make-up. It wasn't just that I felt embarrassed to be different from others but I found this new life more exciting. I got used to living this double life of home and outside. Not long after, all my siblings were doing the same thing. We bought a radio and played it whenever my father wasn't home, which was most of the day. But all this in comparison with what I saw and learned in the village was trivial. When I graduated from high school and was recruited for Health Corps, which of course drove my father crazy but he could do nothing about it, my new life began. I entered an entirely new world.

This was amazing, a real eye-opening experience. It totally changed my outlook and my life. Poverty was not new to me but the poverty in this village in Azerbaijan was something else. What really shocked me wasn't that poverty was almost absolute but that they were so strangely ignorant of its existence. These people had no doctors, no hospitals. They relied on talismans and herbs for cures of their illness. Even those who went to the cities for doctors were often too late to really see the benefit. Unlike my school, here I felt that I was the one who could teach them about "modern ways of life" (raveshe-e-modern-e-zendegi). But I learned more there than anywhere else. I learned that poverty itself does not simply compel people to change their lives. Rather, they should be aware of other possible ways of living. I think this recognition had everything to do with the choices I made in my life afterwards. From this village I came back with a belief in social change. I was very angry at the disparities in my country. I was prepared to embrace Marxist ideas and soon I found them.

I met Taghi, my husband, in a bookstore when I was looking for children's books to send to my students in the village. He was also there buying books, but seemed to be a regular there and friends with the salesman. We entered a conversation and in the end following his suggestion, I bought Samad Behrangi's¹²⁴ books and soon I was a leftist. But like Taghi, I also did not believe in armed action of the leaders without the participation of people. Seeing what I had seen in the village, I believed that we needed to work on reaching people and raising their consciousness, rather than individually sacrificing

¹²⁴ He was a famous cotemporary writer, whose children's books were popular among leftists for exposing social injustice and for metaphorically encouraging resistance against it. His most famous book, "The Black Little Fish" had turned to a semi-manifesto not merely for the left but for many religious intellectuals.

ourselves. Predictably, like many leftists, I also ended up in jail [under the Shah] where I spent five years of my life, feeling somewhat isolated for I did not belong to the guerrillas (*cherika*), who had at the time become the dominant forces of political activism.

While the reality of the transformative impact of these interactions can be generalized, the particular ways in which different subjects on either side--the villagers and the corps members--experienced these encounters cannot. I will not here go into the details of the complex socio-cultural and political effects of these encounters. I however invite the reader to imagine a wide range of possible desires, nostalgia, alienation, disgust, humiliation, arrogance, curiosity, and loss or consolidation of faiths that these interactions must have invoked. One thing was certain. The old regimes of knowledge no longer sufficed in responding to the new situation. The formation of new subjectivities and social cultural transfigurations was inevitable.

The new left which emerged in the aftermath of defeat in 1953 was outraged by the Toudeh Party's lost chances. The new religious intellectuals were furious at the many influential clerics' apolitical position towards the state and "traditional" (*sonnati*) views. For Shariati, this "traditional clergy" (*ākhound-e-sonnati*) represented a corrupted version of Shi'ism to which he referred as "Shi'ia Safavi" (Safavid Shi'ism), and against which he offered a return to the "original" radical "Alavi Shi'ism." Both the new left and Shari'ati claimed to have departed from the current ideas by claiming a return to their foundational dogmas, original Marxism and Shi'ism respectively. For the left, this claim to original Marxist-Leninism was in fact a mixture of local political culture with Marxism, overshadowed by the then-popular Latin American left, particularly Cuban Revolutionaries. For Shari'ati, the return was from "conservative Shi'ism,"

institutionalized under Savafid dynasty, to its “revolutionary spirit,” the Shi`ism of Imam Ali, in its blending of Marxism, African and Latin American Revolutionary anti- and postcolonial ideas with modern Western philosophy. The new dynamics of power and knowledge and related notions of submission and dissidence were exemplified in the pioneering metaphors of Shari`ati’s novel *shabih khāni* and Shamloo’s¹²⁵ new genera of poetry.

Having left the Toudeh Party, Shamloo initially wrote of his despair and frustration at not being able to “have people sit on his shoulders and carry them around” so that he could “show them how they have been fooled in taking the light of the lamps for that of the real sun.”¹²⁶ Jalal Al-e- Ahmad left the Toudeh Party and went on a pilgrimage in Mecca from which he returned with a sense of abjection about his past. He wrote against fascination with the West and its God-forsaken modernity, encouraging Iranian intellectuals to return to their native roots, which, in his view, were Islamic. It was to this fertilized ground cultivated by the radicalism of the left, the global euphoria of revolutionary and liberation movements, and Al-e-Ahmad’s reading of nativism, to which Shari`ati returned from Paris to convey his message of “return to one’s self” (*bāzgasht beh khishtan*).¹²⁷ Ironically, and not surprisingly for the nature of *shabih khāni*, Sharit`ati’s *shabih khāni* prepared the theoretical ground for the Mojahedin’s militancy and Khomeini’s populism. It offered religion the popularity of a political movement and

¹²⁵ While Shamloo initially followed Nima Yoshij, who is considered the father of modern Iranian poetry “sh`er-e no,” he later introduced his own genre, which is even less confined within the boundaries of the rhythms of Iranian classic Poetry. This genre which became the most dominant form among the new generation of poets is known as “Free Poetry” (Sh`er-e-Āzad), or “White Poetry” (Sh`er-e-Sepeed).

¹²⁶ Interestingly some people read this poem as an allusion to the White Revolution and the way it claimed to be a revolution, a lamp for the sun. It has also been suggested that Shamloo was in fact referring to the Toudeh Party and suggesting that its claims to Marxism and social justice were fake. I have herein chosen the first reading.

¹²⁷ This is an allusion to his book by the same title that was published in 1977.

a mystical revival. On the shoulders of this “redeemed” and mobilized populace, Khomeini returned. Together, Shari`ati and Mojahedin, the organization which ironically later became the Regime’s most hated enemy, plowed the soil out of which Khomeini’s Islamic Government grew.

Shamloo’s poem, “Funeral Oration,” reflects the political culture of dissidence of the era. Giving up on the dream of carrying people on his shoulders to show them the truth, which was a laborious gradual task with a seemingly unattainable result, Shamloo chose to project outward the fire that was ignited by the self-sacrifices of the leftist guerrillas in Siyahkal. The leaders of this organization, “cherikha-ye fadayee-e-khalgh” (the people’s self-sacrificing guerrillas), Ahmad Zadeh and Poyan, had suggested that the extreme energy released by the courageous acts of this “small engine,” the vanguard militants, would set into motion the “large engine,” the revolution. It was in this ambiance that our metaphors, *shabih khāni* and Shamloo’s poem, emerged and were transformed to stand for their related sociopolitical groups and the new sociality.

Shabih khāni: A Faithful Transgression and A Transgressive Faithfulness

As a child of the Karbala event, “*shabih khāni*” (reading similar) has often been narrated as the self-sacrificing act of a distinguished yet marginalized group of saintly individuals, Imam Hussein and his companions, against injustice and corruption. In narrating a sacred event, it oscillates between the constraints of the divine and the spontaneity inherent to human practices. Its complex story of marginalization is characterized by the divine distinction due to its martyrs’ kinship relation to the Prophet and their moral righteousness. With the iconography of Zaynab, a woman captive who is the Prophet’s granddaughter and Imam Hussein’s sister, the happening in Karbala moved

beyond itself and into history. From the outset, it was impregnated not only with the contradictions of its narrators' simultaneous elite and subordinate positions but with the tension inherent in any religious text and the rebellious transgression of its multiple readings. These contradictory qualities—marginalization and elitism and sacred dogma and its transgression—is manifest in the *shabih khāni*'s confinement to the story of Karbala, while its very existence remains precarious due to its effort to read the sacred. While *shabih khāni*, in its grassroots version, never kept track of itself, in reenacting new versions of itself, it nevertheless, always remained loyal to its core story of Karbala.

Shabih khāni's troublesome existence is due, on the one hand, to the Islamic orthodoxy that forbids the personification of the Prophet and saintly Imams, and considers such attempts as blasphemous and transgressive.¹²⁸ Its potential to instigate resistance against power has, on the other hand, engendered anxiety for the dominant forces, including the state. Agreeing with the state, secular intellectuals generally considered *shabih khāni* as the lingering of a passé religious tradition and, as if borrowing from Freud, perceived this excessive mourning as a pathological melancholy that by exceeding the economy of mourning negatively affected the productivity of citizens of a modern nation-state. The dissident Left either read it as an opiate of the people, or as the potential ground of a political battle between the state and the “conservative” religious authorities. In this battle, the hegemonic forces attempted to highlight *shabih khāni*'s mourning dimension, while dissidents emphasized its spirit of

¹²⁸ As Michael Fischer, citing deVries who in turn cites Derrida, points out “any successful religious performance seems to always be perperformative.” In Derrida's words, “any religious utterance, act of gesture, stands in the shadow of—more or less—but never totally avoidable—perversion, parody, and kitsch, of blasphemy and idolatry” (Fischer, 2003: 63). This issue is also relevant in relation to *shabih khāni*.

resistance. It was here, in this political ambiance of the 1960s, that the *shabih khāni* of the dissident religious intellectuals and Shamloo's poem converged.¹²⁹

Shabih khāni has been tolerated precisely because it has managed to keep a "safe" distance from "reality." It has survived by holding on to popular religious sentiments, on the one hand, while remaining an amateurish performance, to evade the Islamic dogma regarding representation and personification, on the other. Its history has been one of vacillation, rupture, and enduring persistence, simultaneously undermined and manipulated by religious and political authorities.¹³⁰ It has maneuvered between contradictions residing in and emanating from the official religious discourse while constantly distorting it, identifying¹³¹ with, yet distancing from it, improvising while it is annually rehearsed. The goal in *shabih khāni* is not so much to create identical situations as proximities, not so much identification, as intimacy,¹³² and sympathy; it seeks to map

¹²⁹ It was in this atmosphere that the leftist playwright, Gholam Hussein Sa'edi wrote of a *shabih khāni* in a village in which year after year a peasant played the role of Imam Hussein, while the landowner's agent disguised as Shemr. In Sa'edi's play, in that specific year, the peasant, who in his real life is fed up with the unjust treatment of the landowner and his agent, suddenly decides to turn the event around. Instead of letting himself to be killed in the hands of Shemr, as in *shabih khāni*, he chooses to stop playing the "mazlum" (innocent victim), and instead be the fighter against injustice. Right on the stage, he rewrites *shabih khāni* by killing Shemr, the landlord's agent.

¹³⁰ While the Shah's Regime considered its subaltern forms anti-modern, its traditionalized staged performance in the Shiraz Feast and Art Festival marked the celebration of the Shah's claim to 25 centuries of dynastic history. It was attended by a foreign audience, including anthropologists who compared it to Christian passion plays or Brechtian modern theatre (Beeman, Chelkowski, Homayoni and others, 1979).

¹³¹ The question of identification with the tragedy of Karbala is a complicated one. As Lila Abu-Lughod, writing about the "Awlad 'Ali Bedouin families in the Western Desert of Egypt" points out, "women who come to deliver condolences (y'azzum)...approach the house or camp wailing...it is a heartrending chant bemoaning the woman's own loss of her closest deceased family member" (1986). In *shabih khāni* as well people mainly read similarity between their own losses and that of Zaynab and Imam Hussein. That is why in the death of a young loved one, the young martyrs of Karbala, Ghasem and Ali Akbar, are summoned. In crying for Ghasem and Ali Akbar, the person mourns her personal loss. In relation to the event of Karbala, the question of identification is at once created through *shabih khān*, reading similar, and yet kept at a distance, as the divine figures to which the ordinary people are not identifiable but can imitate them as unreachable role models.

¹³² In her recent article about the question of the Danish cartoons Saba Mahmood argues that the Muslim community feels the assaults of these cartoons not simply as disrespect of their Prophet but also as a personal assault, due to the intimacy they feel between themselves and their Prophet. That Mohammad is

out spatial and temporal landscapes in their proximities and distances, traces and trajectories, in relation to known referents.

Like Brechtian theatre, the “traditional” form of *shabih khāni* constantly reminds its audience of its “unreality,” of its being staged. The “actors,” including those playing Yazid and Shemr, join the circle with the audience during the intervals of their acts and often cry along with the audience. The audience also participates in the play, not only by vocally expressing emotions, but by repeating some of the words. There is no directing involved. The characters who reenact a role continue playing it every year, and are often known in the small villages as Shemr, Hussein, and so on. Neither in its decorative set, nor in the choice of its characters, does *shabih khāni* in its grassroots form attempt to provide a close resemblance to the Karbala Event. In fact the acting is sometimes so amateurish, the “Shemr’s men” so uncomfortable and apologetic in their roles, and the fights often so cartoon-like that had it not been for the intense grief people feel by their pre-knowledge and perception of the gravity of the tragedy, they would have probably burst into laughter as though watching a comic play.¹³³ Children could have perhaps easily laughed, had it not been for their parents’ tears and loud cries.¹³⁴ And yet in practice, the players and the people express intense grief.

not merely a God’s Messenger whom they respect but a role model they emulate and aspire to become like. While the same relationship is true of the way Iranians relate to Imam Hussein, one cannot reduce the complexities of all these different emotions to a single all-encompassing feeling. A mother of a martyr of the Iran-Iraq War might relate to the story of *shabih khāni* with a different sense than someone without a direct personal experience. The ingeniousness of *shabih khāni* resides in the diverse ways the story of loss is told so that each person finds personal and metaphorical means to identify with it.

¹³³ It has in fact been often criticized by many religious clergy for this comic-like reenactment. There are so many elements that evoke this sense, including sometimes the accent of the players, which are frequently utilized in comic shows.

¹³⁴ In fact the atmosphere is so much similar to an actual mourning that it can be as confusing for children as at any mourning. As in mourning, there are mourners who sincerely cry and express grief, those who cry and yet take their time to gossip, and yet still others whose crying is to be heard louder than their tears. I remember as a young girl, I was very confused to see how all this occurred alongside one another. And

In its “traditional” version, *shabih khāni* neither intends to, nor does it really represent Karbala; it is rather a ritual of remembrance and commemoration. It is a new creation of that which it mimes. The actors who play the Imam Hussein camp are already mourners, as are the audience. Their mourning status is signified by their black outfit, while their sainthood is often distinguished by their green head covers, headbands, or, and wristbands. As in Brechtian theatre, these signs of mourning reveal the event before it is reenacted, so as to allow for moral and ethical reflection by the audience.

Distinctively, however, a significant aspect of this moral pedagogy and redemption is believed to depend on the intensity of the emotional reaction to the event and to its reenactment. Thus, the audience and the actors articulate their grief, anger, and shame both verbally and in bodily gestures, from crying to beating themselves.

Yet this pre-knowledge of the events does not annul the shock each new encounter. This is a familiarity that resembles the experience of having been to a forest before, which never excludes the possibility of finding new directions, dead ends, and shortcuts, the second time one visits it, experiencing a refreshing sense of spontaneity and an amateurish naiveté.¹³⁵ The theatricality of *shabih khāni* induces inevitable fluidity.

Yet I remember when I laughed, the pain of my mother’s pinch on my arm and her “shush” and whispering in my ears that laughing in such an occasion is sinful reminded me that one’s emotions here were as much about one’s salvation as about public display.

¹³⁵ This improvisation of course fades away and is turned into professional acting and staging in the “reenactment” of *shabih khani* that are staged in theatres, nowadays, or as it was performed in the “Jashn-e- Honare- Shiraz” (the Celebration of The Art In Shiraz “ which was hosting international guests under the Shah). *Shabih khāni* had two distinctive forms of appearance, belonging to different spheres of class and social and cultural milieu: the first was that of the rural or poor suburbs, mostly populated by the people having immigrated from the village; this *shabih khāni* was considered, by the authorities, an unorthodox, low-culture, and low class phenomenon. The other type of *shabih khāni*, its professional theatricalization, was perceived as a “high cultured” artistic form or as a modern attempt in preserving old traditions. During the revolutionary movements, *shabih khāni* incorporated the elements of both forms and turned into a popular and revolutionary event. Also, its grass-root form was subsided after the revolution, for Khomeini suggested it was as an unorthodox practice, the state utilized its familiar features especially during the Iran-Iraq war, in novel ways toward its political agendas.

As an embodied practice, with no “professional actors,” no “formal” rehearsal, except its attempt to remain faithful to its religiosity, it is at once more rigid and more spontaneous than a “real” play. Its religious aura separates it from all ordinary events, but its complex form which mixes poetry, drama, and religious sentiments with universal themes of loss, courage, and shame, in a language that reaches local audiences, makes it accessible even to children.¹³⁶ *Shabih khāni* is keen to avoid creating a sense of there and then, in Karbala; the emphasis is rather on the here and now, on the present that remembers and offers a gist of the events, only hinting at non-identical similarities with the present.

It would be a great mistake to perceive all singular *shabih khānis* as a single entity. It is even more erroneous to confuse the modern mass-mediated, politically-manipulated *shabih khāni*, with those of the lay people.¹³⁷ In the televised *shabih khāni*, all the old elements are transformed. If there seems to be any amateurish acting, it is itself a modern artistic form of theatricality. The scenes are at once more real and more distant from the audience. Relying on media, the state directs its own *shabih khāni* in which its transgressive proximity to the original is obscured by a simultaneous separation

¹³⁶ I still remember very vividly, one of the most emotional experiences of watching a *shabih khāni*. I was about five years old at the time and my sister was seven and had started going to school. We were very close and attached to one another and these hours of separation from her while she was at school felt agonizing to me. A cousin of ours had also died that year. My sister, my mother and I were watching the scene where the two sons of Muslim, one of the characters in *shabih khāni*, were being separated from one another. They were holding each other tight while the men of Yazid’s troops were trying to loosen their grips and move them away from one another. The loud cries of the crowd were accompanying those of the two boys who played the roles, as they recited the lyrics about their sorrow of separation, I suddenly found myself and my sister holding each other tightly, both crying so hard, almost hysterically, as though we were about to be separated. Our cries had been so intense and loud, and “better performed” than that of the boys that the attention of the crowd had shifted to us. They were asking my mother the reason for our emotional distress, and my mom was looking at us, puzzled. Later we were separated for over a decade, and every time I thought of her, the image of those boys and ourselves played back in my mind.

¹³⁷ This distinction does not mean that the new *shabih khāni* that are performed by lay people now are not informed by that of the media, nor that the latter has not co-opted the elements of the former.

of the actors and spectators, while including the latter to perform their prescribed roles in an already set scenario.

That the revolutionary guards of the Islamic Republic become the very embodiment of Imam Hussein's army, in the words of Aya-ullah Gilani, exemplifies this very distinction between the two *shabih khānis*. Yet, during the Iran-Iraq War, this reincarnation and loose similarity was embodied on the one hand in the green headbands of the revolutionary guards and those of the *basij* (the voluntary militia), insinuating the Iranian army as the troops of Imam Hussein. If Iraqi soldiers were not wearing red uniforms, the color of clothing that revealed the murderous troops of Yazid in *shabih khāni*, by a "simple" change in Saddam Hussein's name to Saddam Yazid his troops came to represent and embody Yazid's camp.¹³⁸ These loose and general similarities and distinctions, which the former *shabih khāni* never utilized as a means of identification, opened up a large terrain within which Khomeini's modern *shabih khāni* maneuvered,¹³⁹

¹³⁸ In some *shabih khānis*, when it was possible to get their hands on some old style army hood or vest, Yazid's men wore them as indicators of their armed force vis-à-vis Imam's unprepared status for battle which was to convey the uneven battle and the cruelty of the troops of Yazid.

¹³⁹ I will never forget my very embarrassing experience while going to one of these *shabih khānis* in a small town into which we had just moved. It was the morning of Ashura and Imam Hussein was to be killed, so the crowd was very anxious and about to begin its intense mourning and commemoration of the Karbala event. A *shabih khāni* was about to be staged in a plaza. The alley was populated with men, women and children of different ages and sexes, all walking towards a huge public courtyard where the reenactment of Ashura event in Karbala was to commence. The "actors," dressed in their costumes were walking along in the same direction. I was thirteen years old then, at the age when many Iranian men of that period began targeting girls with their sexual verbal or even physical assaults on the streets. That day, while walking to the courtyard, along with hundreds of others, and having fallen slightly apart from my family, I first heard a very obscene sexual assault whispered in my ears and then felt a pinch on my arm. I turned back and here was a guy dressed as Imam Hussein or one of his men [one could never tell, unless one knew who played which parts], walking by my side, with his hand still about to offer himself another squeeze of my flesh. I was so outraged that without thinking I shouted: "khāk bar sare imam Hussein kardan," (dirt on the head of your Imam Hussein," which of course was an abbreviated form of saying dirt on you by this inappropriate action playing as Imam Hussein. The moment I said this, was the moment everyone and I noticed the inappropriateness of my words. Everybody understood though the context in which the words had rushed out of my mouth and I was therefore forgiven. This event reveals the floating character of the actors and their inconsistency with the supposed morays of the Imam. The performativity of the ritual is at once emphasized and its relation to the sacred is rendered confusing.

oscillating between “blasphemous identification” and radical reinvention, both made possible by modern regimes of knowledge and power, and a mass-mediated religiosity.

Shabih khani: The Origin and Origination

The exact date and place of the origination of *shabih khāni*, to which Peter Chelkowski in his article entitled “Ta'ziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran” refers as “the only indigenous drama engendered by the world of Islam,” is still uncertain (1979). T`azieh khāni means “mourning recitation” or “reading of mourning hymns.”¹⁴⁰ As a “ritual theatre,” *shabih khāni* “derives its form and content from deep-rooted religious traditions.” Yet, while Chelkowski suggests that it “is Islamic in appearance” but “strongly Persian, drawing vital inspiration from its special political and cultural heritage,” I would argue that it is Islamic and Persian in appearance and content, and yet as such it is neither. For not only the form and the content are intertwined but, as everything in Iran, the Islamic elements of *shabih khāni* and those which are seen as Persian are so enmeshed with one another that they are no longer separable.

Some scholars trace the history of *shabih khāni*'s emergence in Iran to the Safavid dynasty (1502-1736) when Shi`ism became institutionalized by the state as the official religion. There is a consensus that it was further elaborated under the Qajar dynasty (1792-1925) when both the kings and the distinguished `ulama (religious scholars) sponsored its performances. Under the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) it was often stigmatized by the influential `ulama and the state, as an unorthodox or anti-modern ritual

¹⁴⁰ Chelkoswki suggest that t`aziyeh is a more accurate title, though he does not mention *shabih khāni* , which is in fact a more commonly used term by lay people. I have chosen to use the term *shabih khāni* not only because t`aziyeh khani is a general title by which people refer to nearly all religious mourning, while *shabih khāni* is specific to the ritual/reenactment of the Karbala event, and is more commonly used by people, but also because its fascinating complexity opens up venues of exploration and metaphoric and aesthetic possibilities for the purpose of this enquiry.

of the rural, lower-class people. It nevertheless continued to live on and be manipulated both by the state and the religious clergy in the pursuit of their agendas.¹⁴¹

Inadequately translated as “Passion play,” *shabih khāni* is by no means a mere manifestation of religious passion, as the English translation implies;¹⁴² nor is it an entirely conformist religious embodied practice. It is, rather, a constantly improvised and yet structured performance, similar to Saba Mahmood’s notion of “rehearsed spontaneity,” (2001) in which the rationalized, routine disciplining of bodily practices is intertwined with passionate and spontaneous acts. As a composite term, *shabih khāni* hosts the specters of the foreign and the native in a single body. The Arabic term, *shabih* (similar), sits side by side with the Farsi term, *khāni* (reading), while *shabih*’s Arabic origin, having lost its foreignness through time, remains like a faded trace of something one no longer recognizes.¹⁴³ Like foreign terms which reside in the native language in their almost never identical original forms and meanings, *shabih* also embodies this quality of a foreign term having gone native. Even its meaning, “similar,” concurs with its disposition as a foreign whose foreignness is nearly dissolved in the native, and a native that always carries a resemblance to its foreign origin. Its foreign origin looms as

¹⁴¹ For a detailed and interesting reading offering different versions of the history of *Shabih khāni* see *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*. 1979. ed. Peter Chelkowski. New York University Press.

¹⁴² The term passion-play, though an absurd, misleading, and inaccurate translation, actually offers, and contains, several divergent and yet interesting dimensions to, and assumptions about “*shabih khāni*.” It imposes, on the one hand, an already vanished medieval Christian ritual upon an existing and therefore modern Islamic and Persian practice. Aside from its orientalist view, it also presumes that this phenomenon, “*shabih khāni*,” is derived from, and produced entirely by, the religious passions, indicated in C. de Bellaigue’s claim about the Iranians’ craze and a love for pleasure and for being in a constant state of grieving (2005. *In the Rose Garden of The Martyrs: A Memoir of Iran*. New York, Harper Collins Publishers).

¹⁴³ This reawakening of the foreignness of the Arabic term, *shabih*, after centuries of its existence in Iran, is reminiscent of the promise of the Islamic Republic during the Iran-Iraq War to return Karbala, which was said to have fallen into the hands of “Saddam Yazid” (a play with Saddam Hussein’s name) to its righteous owners, the Iranians who were the followers of Imam Hussein.

an unrecognizable distinction, an obscured or vanishing signpost, a vague memory or a subdued feeling the object of which one no longer recalls.

Had it not been modernity's fascination with notions of foreignness and nativism, their coexistence within this term, *shabih khāni*, too, could perhaps have been forgotten, as are nearly all foreign terms in native languages. But beyond abstraction, within the particular context of Iranian modern history, these issues were reawakened from slumber and were reincarnated with new energy, meanings, and dynamics, though carrying their old titles and uniforms. The double fascination with novelty and antiquity, characteristic of modernity, has also haunted recent Iranian history. The closer past was denied as if it was a rapturous diversion from the stream of history. Instead, that which was unreachable and long gone was resurrected as the golden age. This golden age delineated not merely the horizons towards which the future sought aspiration, but it was a bottomless ocean from the depths of which the present fished for nourishment. The fuel for this battle of native versus foreign and the authentic vis-à-vis the fake was provided by simultaneous claims to modernity and a primordial history. Along with their colonial objectives, the birth of such modern social "sciences" as archeology and anthropology is indicative of the desire and mission to excavate and preserve the past in order to write a selective history of nation-states.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ In social science and humanities, attempts were made, on either side, to revive one version of Iranian identity while suppressing the other, often to no avail. Mohammad Jamalzadeh's literary work, *Farsi Shakar Ast* "Farsi Is Sugar (Implying its sweetness)," Kasravi's harsh criticism of Arab's negative influence on Iranians' progress, and the work of Farhangestān Iran to replace Farsi words with those of foreign which often meant Arabic, are examples of the attempt to "Persianize" Iran by eliminating the Arabic elements. Jamal-al-din Asadabadi's efforts, on the other hand, to encourage Iranians to return to their Islamic identity, Shariati's return to the self, "bāzgasht beh khishtan" and Khomeini's project of Islamizing Iran are all attempts to nativizing Islam as the critical element of Iranian identity. Neither did the Shah succeed in erasing *shabih khāni* or other religious elements or other Arabic originated elements of Iranian culture as foreign, nor has the Islamic Republic been able to replace the "pagan," "pre-Islamic" elements with Islamic Culture, (see Michael Fischer . 2003). Karbala commemoration has remained as

The Foreign and the Native in a Single National Body

In the same vein, as though digging up unknown layers of unconsciousness, to invoke a nostalgic sense of a once-upon-a-time glory, different sociopolitical parties in Iran, as in other modern nation-states, stirred up certain alliances and animosities in contested versions of Iranian history. Individuals and political groups relentlessly accused one another of having foreign origins or of being at the service of foreigners. The fabrication of the Shah's story of 2500 years of dynastic Persian Civilization was assisted by archeological discoveries in such sites as Choghā Zanbil, where an ancient town was uncovered in the south of Iran. Likewise, the Left offered "detailed historical accounts" of "socialist movements" and "communal life" that even predated Islam.¹⁴⁵ And Islamists went back in their history of origin, as far as the first human, "Ādam." Each of course denied the other the truth of their historical claims, thereby considering them as foreign to the "authentic" Iranian past.

An example of the obsessive preoccupation with foreignness was evident in an article published in *Ettel'at*, a government newspaper under the Shah's Regime, which suggested that Khomeini was of Indian descent. Many accounts of the Revolution of 1979 attribute it to the offense felt by the people of Qom towards this article. Khomeini, in turn, spoke of the dissidents of the Islamic Republic as the "strangers' arms" (ayādi-e-bigāneh) or the "foreigners' servants" (nokarān-e- ajāneb). In these debates about authenticity, nativism, and foreignness, the religious clergy accused the "seculars" of

essential to Iranians today, as the Iranian New Year. New debates about Valentine's Day and its prevailing celebration by the youth, which about ten years ago was not even known in Iran, adds a new element of rapid globalization and its consumer culture. That the parliament should make a formal announcement suggesting that the wedding anniversary of Fatemeh, the Prophet's daughter, and the first Imam of the Shi'i, Ali, to be celebrated as Valentine Day is self-explanatory and illustrative of the interesting dynamics of power and complex relations between all these conflicting identities.

¹⁴⁵ See *Vāpasin Jonbesh-hāye-Ghroon-e-Vostāyee* by Ali Akbar Mir Fetros, in Farsi.

adopting foreign Western ideas, of “Westoxification” (*gharb zadehgi*). The latter blamed the former for preventing the nation from returning to and continuing with its glorious pre-Islamic civilization, which would have eventually led to modernity and progress, had it not been ruptured by the invasion of “the uncivilized, nomadic, Arabs.” These historical and relational notions demarcated the ongoing battle over the boundaries of the foreign and the native coexisting and haunting a single national body. Even today, this tension is manifest in the way Iranians communicate their discomfort with the name of their country, in jokes¹⁴⁶ and in the ways those living abroad identify themselves either as Persian, Iranian, both, and sometimes neither.

These divisive elements turned different groups of citizens into foreigners in their home country, according to particular ways of being and thinking. Under the Shah, for the state and much of the middle-class secular urban population, the foreign was defined through words that had become outdated in the living language. “Dehāti” (rural), “kouli,” (gipsy), “khorāfāti” (superstitious), “ākhond-e-bogando” (stinky clergy), were the terms by which outdated-foreign ways of being an Iranian were delineated. Some particularly religious minded individuals had their own terms for native foreigners: “farangi maāb” (foreign or western-mannered), “sar-e-pā shāshideh” (the one who has peed standing), and “fokoli” (the one who wears bowtie), invoking a sense of a foreign term that has not yet blended into the native language. These labels did not exhaust the constantly emerging and inventive norms of propriety for Iranians of this particular

¹⁴⁶ A joke was going around in 2002 when I was in Iran which related that the Islamic Republic had decided to change the name of the country. Iran, the joke suggested, was very problematic for the clergy. It was, on the one hand, a name for women and it had already been raped by Iraq, (the word invasion and rape in Farsi are the same (*tajāvoz*)). The regime was to change the name to *Narimān*, which is a composite term, “Nar” (male) and “Iman” (faith) would resolve the problem, the joke said, once and for all. *Narimān* was also an ancient, pre-Islamic name that implies masculinity.

period. Nor did they remain static in their connotations or significance. Not only did they entail further complexities than their literal meanings conveyed, but their meanings and statuses were also subjected to the rapid transformation that the modernizing project brought about in all aspects of social life in Iran, especially after 1953.

In 1960, the direction nevertheless seemed to move predominantly towards secular westernization as a more authentic and natural path for the nation. The delicate question was to what extent this shift could be tolerated before it came to collide with contradictory attitudes that perceived it as foreign. All these inconsistent views intersected in a single agenda: delineating and redefining the boundaries of normative citizenry and deviance in an unsettlingly transitory national body within which contradictions coexisted, collided, and sought ways to settle down, as one thing or another. The vitality of this national body depended as much on exploring deviance as fighting it. For the state, at this time, the closer one acted like a Westerner, the more modern and progressive one was. Urbanity and Western secularism in 1960 Iran signified belonging to the modern nation.

Tailoring Proper Citizens

The negative attitude towards “rural mannerism” (*dehātigari*) and “ākhundigari” (clerical mannersim) embodied that which was no longer to be part of the national character. To fall outside of particular codes of conduct was to become a foreigner. And yet in this fleeting socio-cultural construction of normative nationality, being a proper Muslim was as vital, if not more, as being modern to many Iranians. The disciplining of the national body was not merely a task that the state had assumed for itself, but was also carried out by citizens. Mr. Noorani, a middle ranking clergy, compared these different

ways of feeling native or foreign in one's own home country under the Shah's Regime and in the early years of the Islamic Republic as:

During the Shah, a person from rural areas felt so alienated in the city. Those neat-looking, arrogant, middle class "fokolis" (bowtie wearing individuals) walked on the sidewalk trying to put distance between themselves and these rural-looking individuals as if they were infested by lice or were even lice. They seemed to be embarrassed to even think of these individuals as their fellow country people. The Revolution changed all this. This very rural person was now given a gun as a "basiji," or a "pasdar" and became a bodyguard for the ministers, even for the Imam [Khomeini]. They were now the wardens in jails in which those middle class educated people were jailed. The Revolution made these belittled people feel empowered. It gave them power, guns, and character. Their photo appeared on the first page of newspapers, alongside the ministers, the President, alongside me.¹⁴⁷ This was a real Revolution. It gave the "dispossessed ones" (mostaz'afin) the feeling of belonging, no longer foreigners in their own country. The Revolution made them feel that they now owned the country. Of course one fights for one's home. That was why they fought and died so eagerly in the Iran-Iraq War and against internal enemies.

It was in accordance with these transitory and inconsistent norms of proper citizenry that, on a hot summer day of 2004, several women riding on the city bus to the North of Tehran called Mrs. Mohebbi "a stinky fogey" (*bogandoye ommol*), for she was covered, "like a hezbollahi." Being too tightly covered, for these women, meant being a

¹⁴⁷ Mr. Noorani's own story is a fascinating one that is still related by former inmates as a joke. Himself from a rural family, he had pursued religious education in the Madresh in Qom but had never advanced to completion. In the early years of the Islamic Republic, he was taught by the leftist "collaborators" (tavvābs) about Marxism so that he could engage in debates with those inmates who still defended Marxism. He organized classes to which some inmates were forced to attend and in which he, as he put it, "discovered and revealed the contradictions in Marxism." He was also broadcasted on prison TV channel, which was mandatory for all inmates in the wards to watch. He appeared among the leftists in jeans and Chinese style blouses, the outfit which was common among the leftists under the Shah. He even half folded his sleeves as the leftists often did. He would however attend in other occasions in his clerical attire. From his clothing to his manner and the content of his speech, he seemed to attempt to prove himself, in a defensive mode, as modern, having somewhat internalized the dominant attitude of the Shah's era in which a clergy man was seen as non-modern. These conciliatory efforts were manifested in such a hilarious manner that Nazanin, a leftist inmate with an amazing sense of humor and talent in imitation reenacted him with exaggeration. For her, as for many former leftist inmates, he became "the best comedian ever, even better than Charlie Chaplin. For just remembering what he's said and how he said it could make you laugh even under torture. This is a talent no comedian possesses." That Noorani was ridiculed for his attempt to prove himself as modern and his very need to do so were illustrative of the power of the norms.

“hezbollahi” (a member of God’s Party), synonymous with being a supporter of the Islamic Republic. A mother of a state martyr, once again, Mrs. Mohebbi was becoming an outsider in her home country. For these middle class women, the Islamic Republic was now an embodiment of a backward passé attitude which had cost Iranians their respect and prestige in the world, its place in the world as a civilized nation. Similarly, in 1976, some people in Qom had perceived their duty to punish Mrs. Shirazi, for not being properly covered. As she was passing through their city, a group of young men threw stones at the window of the bus to remind her that this city did not tolerate immodesty.

Around that same period, prior to the Revolution, Tehrani women strolled around in their bikinis on the streets of Babolsar, a northern Iranian town famous for its beaches. While these women were often not punished by the people of the town, Lady Batool (Batool Khānoom), ¹⁴⁸an elderly woman who is now the grandmother of a state martyr, went back from her doctor’s visit in town to her home in the village that day of 1977, shaken by the sight of this “shameless nudity.” She told her family that “the end of the age has arrived” (*ākharol zamān shodeh*), implying that things were so disconcerting and disjointed that it was time for the Imam of the Age to return. These contradictory views and sentiments about the norms of proper citizenry and subjectivity were anchored in a rapidly transforming society. Constantly modifying, unstable features of the cities created tensions between the state and different groups of people and within groups. The Shah’s White Revolution intensified these tensions.

¹⁴⁸ Even though referring to women by their first name could imply their lower class status, my use of the first name here is due to the fact that Batool khanoom never introduced herself by her last name.

New Arrivant

The “White Revolution” freed most villagers from the landlords but also left them unable to compete with large mechanized landlords or imported American, Pakistani, Israeli or Thai products. In large numbers, villagers left for the cities to offer themselves as cheap labor. As “free” individuals, deprived of the means of survival in the village, and of the means of production in the city, they came to presumably belong to the workers, who, according to Marx and Engels, were to have “nothing to lose but their chains” (2002). Most of them, though, became members of the army of surplus labor. The relationship of the city authorities to these new residents was that of simultaneous disgust and exploitation. Unable to afford housing, the status of these newcomers to the city was also ambivalent; they often lived within and yet somewhat outside of the city, in a seemingly semi-parasitic coexistence with, yet at the margins of, the city. Many became city dwellers, not symbiotically, but in “thievery,” by poaching the city’s electricity, reshaping its landscape, and utilizing its “privileges.” Those who made it to a regular job and could afford to move closer to the center, often joined others to tell jokes about these “dehātis” (villagers), in the suburbs. But the peripheral residents were by no means powerless; they expanded the margins of the city, politics, and religion beyond its norms. Like the *shabih khāni* that incorporates the official religious narrative into its transgressive and marginalized mode of performance, and in doing so stretches the boundaries of orthodoxy, these migrants also lived at the peripheries and yet influenced and were instrumental to the central forces.

In their forced exile and incursion into the city, these “arrivants”¹⁴⁹ created new identities, boundaries, neighborhoods and imposed novel ways of living on the city and on themselves. The assemblage of incongruous, random, and disjointed elements, the product of different languages, familial relations, memories, and cultural habits, which lived alongside in a strange space as if in between two worlds and temporalities, like in dreams and jokes,¹⁵⁰ resulted in surprisingly unpredictable reversals and punchlines. Yet, as jokes and dreams reveal the abnormality of the normal by exaggerating the anomalies of the normative, these new city dwellers illuminated the cluttered, frenzied, paradoxical, and irrational nature of city-life. Their incoherent being-in-the-world was a direct outcome of the irregular growth of modernity and they were thus as much out of and in place as were the assumedly normal ways of life.

The city tolerated these rural migrants, with an ambivalence like that of jokes and dreams, as inevitable potential hazards and yet instrumental sources of relief that could be represented as insignificant. If the authorities put up with political jokes and utilized them as a source of release for intense emotions and intense dissatisfaction with social conditions, these newcomers provided a channel for the need and the anxiety of the market economy for labor and modernity.¹⁵¹ By exemplifying a “defective” lifestyle,

¹⁴⁹ I am borrowing this term from Derrida to imply the arrival of something or someone whose arrival is not expected or desired (1993:34). Even though Derrida is concerned more with the international movements of population, and with the metaphor of arrivant, and I am speaking of a domestic migration, in both cases the “unexpected” is in fact rooted out of their places by the very forces that do not willingly accept their arrival.

¹⁵⁰ This reminds me of my dream while in the US of being in the interrogation room in Evin Prison in Iran, and tortured for not having met the deadline in writing the first chapter of my dissertation.

¹⁵¹ This brings to mind Lila Abu-Lughod’s reservation about romanticizing small acts of resistance (1990). As she rightly shows these acts, in their very transgression might end up falling prey to even more powerful institutions of power. She uses the example of resisting parents’ authority while becoming somewhat entrapped in that of the state. Here too, these individuals leave their rural ways of life behind but become entangled in the complex net of city institutions and laws, with all its messy and unfamiliar characteristics.

they allowed the “mainstream” city dwellers to assert themselves as modern, superior, more authentic urban citizens. Their languages and social mannerisms were ridiculed in jokes by the residents of the city, who were themselves earlier migrants. This gave them a way of releasing anxiety and a sense of superiority and belonging.¹⁵²

Yet, the appearance of these semi-urban, semi-rural newcomers in unexpected places, as if they were ghosts, reminded the state and some of its citizens of its failure to exorcise the past, to keep the past in museums and archives, not in ghostly uncanny transpirations that implied modernity’s inadequacy. They appeared everywhere, walking side by side with the “real modern citizens,” and engendered discomfort, as Mr. Noorani related to us. The tolerance of urban authorities reached its limit when these neighborhoods grew in size and numbers. Complex forms of *shabih khāni* were now performed in the cities, behind which the danger of invoking the revolutionary spirit palpitated. City officials began to feel the threat. The early 1970s increase in oil prices had further intensified the migration from the villages. It was as though the city had been invaded by thieves. In the every day language of the middle class, the embarrassing “backward” rituals, “unethical” thievery,” and non-uniformed existence of these “rural” city dwellers haunted the modern façade of the city and the nation-state. The authority of the state was proven shaky and penetrable; the Shah’s claim to the “great civilization” was mocked by these “arrivants” who had come to stay in their new home.

In addition to this seemingly irrelevant yet essential group of people, there existed yet another type of periphery, which consisted of the residents of the luxurious houses of

¹⁵² There are not that many families who can really trace their origins to the “original” Tehran, though most people make such claims. The history of Tehran is a brief and modern one. Its expansion has occurred mainly in the last century. In 19th century it was no more than a little town with less than two hundred thousand inhabitants. Thus like New York, or most other metropolitan cities, Tehran is a city of recent migrants, only in different periods.

the north of Tehran. Paradoxically, the two ends of this spectrum of poverty and wealth, the semi-rural, and the semi-western ways of lives, met at the margins of the labor market, when these free laborers participated in building houses, banks, prisons, and mental institutions. Some sought work in the luxurious houses as maids, cooks, gardeners and so on. They met people whose life was spent between ski resorts and beaches in Europe and villas in the north of Iran, while their money increased exponentially in Swiss banks and their children traveled to Tehran from the US and Europe for vacation. In such encounters, the desires and fantasies, which were provoked by what the eyes saw and imagined, stood in an outrageous contrast to the realities of life in those shanty houses to which their exhausted bodies and confused minds returned every night. The memories and fantasies of the daytime saturated their nightly dreams and spilled out to their awakening hours, to desiring to live those dreams, no longer in dreams but in daylight.

This was how Mrs. Ahmadi had raised her children, all three of whom died untimely deaths; one of them was killed during the revolution and two were later executed because of their affiliation with Mojahedin. She and her family had come to Tehran from a small village in Lorestan Province. Only a couple of years later, her husband's brain was smashed as he took an accidental fall from the rooftop of a fifteen-story building in which he worked as a construction worker. The family was paid no compensation. Mrs. Ahmadi became a maid in one of these luxurious houses where her two sons and her daughter were exposed to the absurdity of the gigantic gap between their world and the other.¹⁵³ Later, their desire for justice led them to the world of a

¹⁵³ Many of these upper class people hired their maids and cooks from other countries. For educated Iranians, even one's maid could be an embarrassment for these "high class" families. Some of these

seemingly absolute equality, the world of the dead, though even as dead they remained marginalized.

The effect of these encounters, for many of these residents, was not always that of a rage against, or a desire to fulfill, their sense of deprivation but that of disgust, of having come to witness ways of living and being drastically different from their own, and of the threat that their children would be contaminated with these corrupted norms. They watched these “westernized” fellow country people as if they were afflicted with a contagious disease. The feeling of loss of morals and of religious values shook them to their bones. Lady Batool was not the only one who felt that the time had arrived for the Imam of the Age to return. There were many who were ready to embrace an Imam of change. Khomeini, the Imam of this particular Age was preparing for the return. He was right to suggest that the Iranian Revolution was a “miracle” (*m`ojezeh*).

It was a miracle of mass mediated *shabih khāni* that brought together this assortment of desires, dreams, and practices, making them seem at once modern and “traditional.” While Shamloo’s poem seemed to be more at home in the educated urban middle class, its sophistication and “high culture” quality limited its subaltern audience. Both Shari`ati and later Khomeini’s *shabih khāni*, took the poem’s attractive elements to reinforce their own stories. The leftists, as Siyahkal’s characters in Shamloo’s poem, were evacuated of their singularity, while the Islamic Republic emerged as a singular “only true Islamic government on Earth.” The *shabih khāni* and Shamloo’s poem exemplified these features.

wealthy women however found it less likely for their husbands to sexually engage with a “traditional,” “rural,” “lower class” maid than a young, “free-spirited,” modern foreign maid.

*Losing kisses on the Way?*¹⁵⁴

Like the *shabih khāni*, Shamloo's poem was also born out of self-sacrifice and massacre in an armed confrontation between a small group of young middle class Marxists and the Shah's army. The protagonists of this battle too were rapidly crushed by the regime, leaving behind corpses and a few injured captives. Like Imam Hussein's sister, Zaynab, some of this battle's survivors also created their own *shabih khāni* in due course. The uncertainty about the poem's origination was not about its date of birth, as was the case with the *shabih khāni* because of its long and diverse historical background. While the *shabih khāni*'s relationship to the Karbala event has always been indispensable to all its forms, the poem's kinship relation to the event of Siyahkal remained obscure, though the poem had an exact date, 1965.

As in the Moses story, the relationship between the mother and the child, the Siyahkal event and the poem, was concealed. Fearing Pharaoh's wrath, the regime's infamous torturous persecution and censorship, the child-poem kept its tie to the mother Siyahkal event a semi-public secret.¹⁵⁵ The very happening that the poem was to turn into an event instead turned into a whisper. Outside of its closed circle, the poem was appropriated to speak for other incidents of martyrdom, for which Karbala provided a meta-text and was itself perpetually revived by them. Yet unlike the story of Moses, here the child, the poem, was to deny its relation to the mother, in order to save both herself and the mother. This child was not unwittingly protected by Pharaoh; nor was it led by

¹⁵⁴ According to Kafka, "written kisses don't reach their destination, they are drunk on the way by the ghost" (Quoted by Mrazek, 1997: 4).

¹⁵⁵ For even though at the time it was not mentioned in the book that the poem was written in dedication for the Siyahkal event, the whispers among dissidents created a sense of public secrecy, albeit in a particular public terrain which was limited to intellectuals.

God “to refuse the breasts of his nurses” and be miraculously “restored to his mother” (Koran: 1983:75-6). Like a bastard child in the specific cultural context of Iran, it was put to work without recognition; it bore children who were not bound by kinship relations.

The poem’s relationship to the authorities was also ambiguous. It too engendered ambivalent possibilities. The regime concentrated on its marginalization, banning it from appearing in textbooks, which further limited its already tapered public reach due to the nature of its medium as a text, which required literacy for access. Yet, as the creator of a new genre of poetry and as the most distinguished Iranian poet of his era, Shamlou was perceived as a voice of modernity which the regime could not ignore.¹⁵⁶ In tolerating *shabih khāni*, the Shah’s regime had endeavored to avoid totally alienating the religious populace, while by sponsoring its co-opted forms in theatre it had positioned itself alongside modern states in preserving and reconstructing “archaic traditions.” Shamlou’s poem also continued to live on at the margins and with constant subjection to censorship. In relation to *shabih khāni*, the state attempted to undermine its radical aspect and turn it into a formalized tradition that still carried its name.

While both events, Siyahkal and Karbala, were dubbed as epics, the “Siyahkal Epic” (Hamāseh-ye-Siyāhkal) and the “Karbala Epic” (Hāmaseh-ye-Karbala), Karbala was also being referred to as the “Karbala tragedy” (fāje`eh-ye-Karbala).¹⁵⁷ The very possibility of *shabih khāni* to be read as a reenactment of a tragedy (fāj`eh) or an “epical” (hamāseh) event offered divergent potentials for reading, under the same title. Shamlou’s

¹⁵⁶ Thus, Shamlou occasionally appeared in popular magazines to embody a tamed version of himself and his genre of poetry, even more curtailed than Zaynab in *shabih khāni* represented by a man disguised as a woman.

¹⁵⁷ Fāje`eh can be translated both as tragedy or disaster, but commonly it is seen more as a tragedy.

poem did not present Siyahkal as a tragedy, and did not leave room for the state to play with it. Yet, its modern form of poetry, resembling nicely-dressed urban citizens, allowed for its form to be imitated. The poem's connection to the Left was no less precarious.

Regardless of all controversies about *shabih khāni*, no Shi'i Muslim ever doubted the significant sacredness of the Karbala Event. In regard to Siyahkal, however, multiple layers of uncertainties and disagreements existed among leftists.¹⁵⁸ While the importance of self-sacrifice was not necessarily negotiated, the particular militancy of these guerrillas and thus the timeliness of the Siyahkal confrontation was. The Toudeh Party, for example, perceived this act as "individualistic adventurism" (*mājerājooyee-ye-fardi*), and "ānārshism" (anarchism). Their notion of the pioneer's armed struggle was also criticized by other organizations known commonly as "political activists" (*siyāsi kārs*), a term that implied that activists had to work among the people and mobilize them for revolution, rather than individually taking up armed struggle.¹⁵⁹

While particular rules of hierarchy delineated the position of different religious clerics, in relation to the leftists, these boundaries, if not non-existent, were at least less articulate and definitive.¹⁶⁰ Leftist organizations dismissed each other's claim to being

¹⁵⁸ The fact that I feel compelled to use the term left for all those organizations that claimed to be leftist is a case in point. For different organizations often wrote each other out as "authentic" left. As in Islam which I choose to go along with the rule according to which one's self-declaration is theoretically sufficient for being considered a Muslim, notwithstanding that in reality this rule is often thrown out of the window, I apply the same logic in regard to the left.

¹⁵⁹ Of course the organization, Cherikhā-ye Fadāyee-ye-Khalgh, responsible for the Siyahkal event, suggested that those accusing it of extremism or adventurism were cowardly conservatives only disguised as Marxists.

¹⁶⁰ While the conflicts of interests were as present among the religious groups as the left, a general collective referent on which all groups could agree, as in the Karbala trope for instance, was absent among the leftists. Marxism was the common ground but the emphasis from Lenin, to Mao, and each particular organization's own reading created great diversity among the groups.

Marxists.¹⁶¹ Despite all these differences, particularly because of the poem's silence about its kinship relationship to Siyahkal, it still stood as an abstract and general metaphor of self-sacrifice and martyrdom not merely for the left but even for the new emerging religious intellectuals, including Shari`ati. For its general theme of fighting injustice and self-sacrifice could feed and supplement the Karbala narrative and its metaphoric utilizations.

Singularity and Plurality in Shabih khāni and the Poem

That Siyahkal was not named in the poem should not undermine its significance. The event was in fact a critical moment in the history of dissidence and affected the political culture of resistance. It radicalized dissident organizations, religious and left, as well as grassroots movements. It also revolutionized poetic metaphors, including Shamloo's poetry. The Siyahkal incident too turned into an "imaginary signification,"¹⁶² and a mythical and metaphoric instance, with political and ethical pedagogical agendas.

Yet, the unnamed, plural protagonists of Shamloo's poem, "the children of the storm," or "the igniters of the fire" at once expanded and curtailed certain potentials

¹⁶¹ Shamloo's own position was also complicated. His departure from Toudeh Party made him an undesirable artist for them. In fact, they tried to bring forth their own committed poets, for example, Siyavash Kasrayee, to undermine Shamloo's popularity among the middle class intellectuals. Yet, Shamloo's literary quality and the ambiance of the time in which Toudeh Party was mainly infamous did not help them achieve their goal. Shamloo's own rebellious attitude to political activism and ideological rigidity as well as organizations made his relation to the left in general an indecisive and troubling one. His distinguished position as the most prominent artist was both elevated by the militant left and yet perceived as insufficient in its political commitment to the left. The old style poets, on the other hand, saw his genre of poetry as destructive to classic Persian Poetry, while those in favor of art for the sake of art criticized it for its socio-political commitment. None could deny his mastery of language, artistic talent and creative and sophisticated mind.

¹⁶² Mbembe defines "imaginary signification" in relation to African people and as a negative imagination of the West about them. For him this imaginary signification means 'that something invented' that, paradoxically, becomes necessary because 'that something' plays a key role, both in the world the West constitutes for itself and in the West's apologetic concerns and exclusionary and brutal practices towards others" (Mbembe, 2001:2). I have, however, used the term in a different connotation, emphasizing its inventiveness and yet its key role in defining and delineating the sociopolitical cultures of the era.

which *shabih khāni* offered. While Shamlou's characters named but did not name themselves, the singularity of Karbala's characters, merging in Khomeini's unorthodox notion of a single "mujahed" (the highest ranking clergy member eligible to be imitated by lay Muslims) as a "vali-e-faghih" (supreme religious leader), however, illuminated the long way that the singularity and metaphoric quality of his version of the *shabih kāani* of Karbala opened up for him. His ascendance to the status of an Imam illustrates his innovative use of the *shabih khāni*.

While both *shabih khāni* and Shamlou's poem refuse to let self-sacrificing deaths fall into oblivion, in their creative manner of mourning the dead, they digress from conventional and orthodox modes of mourning and commemoration. Through their artistic quality, they reproduced, emerged out of, and built upon, death. Because of these very capacities, they lent themselves to constant re-reading and continuous utilization in the here and now of various historical instances and capacities. The Karbala event has been seen either as a tragedy or an epic, often the combination of both, deploying and vacillating between Imam Hussein's "victimhood" (*mazlumiyyat*) and his "conscious and voluntary martyrdom" (*shahādat-e-āgāhāneh*). While all narratives agree on the Imam's decision to resist submission to Yazid, they vary on the continuum ranging from the Imam's decision in choosing martyrdom as the last resort, to martyrdom as an end in and of itself. According to the former view, the betrayal of the Kufee people left the Imam no other choice but to fight. The latter suggests that the Imam was already aware of what was to come, and consciously went to Kufeh to set a model of martyrdom for the future Shi'i communities. In a latter shared ground the *shabih khāni* of the 1960 onward

and Shamlou's poem intersected, incorporated and influenced one another, while *shabih khāni* retrieved for itself other alternatives and distinctive readings of divinity.

Both the events of Karbala and of Siyahkal became archetypal, while their locations, the desert of Karbala and the woods of Siyahkal, moved beyond their localities and became the arch-locales of fighting injustice.¹⁶³ In the chant of the majority of leftists during the Revolution, "we will turn the entirety of Iran into Siyahkal," Siyahkal signified the promise of the Revolution. During the Iran-Iraq War, on the other hand, Karbala was the place of its rescue, from the hands of Yazid (Saddam Hussein), the Islamic Republic army was to rush, shouting: "Karbala, Karbala, we are coming."¹⁶⁴ The following two episodes illustrate how *shabih khāni* and Shamlou's poem had drastically divergent impacts in the revolutionary processes of 1979 and its aftermath.

During the revolution, Khomeini suggested that "every place is Karbala and every day is `Ashura." That he was able to still utilize the same chant during the Iran-Iraq War speaks to the important role Karbala played in the Revolution and for the religious leaders. However, the leftists' chant, "We will turn the entirety of Iran into Siyahkal," saw a strange metamorphosis. In 2003, Shadi, a former inmate narrated this story:

In 1988, after the massacre of thousands of political prisoners by the regime immediately following the end of the Iran-Iraq War, prison officials began transferring us [the surviving prisoners, most of whom were leftist women], to the vacant and extremely dirty wards. It was when Rafsanjani [the president of the time] had agreed to allow for a

¹⁶³ Interestingly neither place bears any significance in and of itself. Karbala used to be a remote town, while Siyahkal is still a little town in the North of Iran.

¹⁶⁴ The constant *shabih khāni* of different historical and symbolic referents is a common practice in Iran today. The "Karbala, Karbala, we are coming" chant, which failed to reach its promise during the Iran-Iraq War, has recently been revised and re-appropriated by Iranian women's campaign for the right to enter Stadiums to watch men's games, especially soccer, which is forbidden for women by the Islamic Republic. Playing with the name of the major stadium in Tehran, "Āzadi" which also means freedom, these women chant, "Āzadi, Āzadi, mā dārim miāyim" (Āzadi, ĀAzadi, we are coming), which also implies a promise to fight and acquire freedom.

United Nation's Human Rights delegation to visit the Iranian political prisons. So as the regime decorated the courtyards and those jails which they were allowed to see, they moved us to the previously vacant wards and hid us behind newly built walls. We thus never got to see Galindopole or his team. Instead we were moved from one smelly and awfully dirty ward to another. Upon our moving in, we immediately began cleaning up and washing everything in the extremely cold water. As soon as the ward was made habitable, they would move us to a new even dirtier one. Sometimes, it was only a matter of a couple of days before we would be moved so much so that most of the time our stuff was still wet while moving. Even though after a few times we became aware of their games, we could still not help but clean every new place to which we were taken, for there was no way that we could have lived with so much dirt. This ridiculously hopeless game of cleaning and being moved was repeated so many times that finally, as we usually did in the face of unbearable situations in jail, we took refuge in humor to deal with the irony of our fate. We, the revolutionaries of yesterday, who were to make the world a beautiful place for our people had now turned into maids. All we were doing was cleaning jails for the regime. So, in mockery of our hopeless situation, borrowing from our revolutionary chant and on the same rhythm with it, "Iran r ā sar āsar Siyahkal mikonin" (we will turn the entirety of Iran into Siyahkal), we chanted: 'Zendān rā sarāsar nezāfat mikonim" (we will clean the entirety of prison).

If the irony of this fate in which the leftists cleaned prison wards for the new state was not apparent enough, it was rendered more so in yet another incident, in the paradoxical unison between the massacre of the dissident inmates in 1988 and the referent of Karbala. No other referent was as commonly utilized by the surviving families, particularly the mothers of executed dissidents, to describe the scene in front of Evin Prison in those days of the fall of 1988, when the regime began informing the families of the execution of their loved ones, than "Sahraye Karbala bood" (it was the Karbala desert), or "Zohr-e-`Ashura bood" (it was the Noon of `Ashura). The only

parallel to these descriptions, that was often used almost interchangeably, was “sahrā-ye-mahshar” (the desert of resurrection day).¹⁶⁵

Dying Children, Suffocating Metaphors

Like those of Karbala, the protagonists of the Siyahkal were also somewhat elite; they were revered in the newly modernizing country for their secular education, middle class social status, and “high culture” which had become modernity’s sacred values. In addition, these heroes met the sociopolitical ethics of their time by taking up armed struggle against the seemingly omnipotent regime of the Shah.¹⁶⁶ Yet, the very daily struggles, sufferings, and deaths of ordinary people, the subalterns who were to be the allies of the left, especially those living in the remote countryside or villages, did not find their way even to the newscolumn of the newspapers. Nor did the left find their way to them. The newspapers did not tell of `Azizeh’s eight month old sister, M`asoumeh, who froze to death in a cold winter of 1971 in a small town in Azerbaijan, no matter how deeply the image of her blue body was engraved in `Azizeh’s memory. Having moved to Tehran, I would later be able to read of poems and stories which reminded me of `Azizeh’s life and her baby sister Masoumeh’s death.¹⁶⁷ `Azizeh, nevertheless, never found access to such stories. The gloomy situation of which writers and poets wrote could have resonated with `Azizeh had she read them. She did not. But she certainly

¹⁶⁵ The same metaphors were most appealing for the survivors of the 2003 earthquake in the Iranian city of Bam to describe the moment after the disaster.

¹⁶⁶ This of course does not mean that there was a conclusively shared positive feeling amongst all the leftists about this event. There were many who did not believe in an armed struggle without connection to the people. Yet, as with the Karbala Event that called for reverence and was utilized by all religious leaders even when its themes or tactics of struggle were not evoked, Siyahkal was also generally respected albeit by those who knew about it and were disillusioned by the Shah’s Regime. This distinction is critical to the ways in which *shabih khāni* and Shamloo’s poem related to society.

¹⁶⁷ Ali Ashraf Darvishian, a leftist writer, wrote of such people in his book of short stories “Seh Khom-e-Khosravi.”

attended *shabih khānis*, time after time, where she was reminded of her baby sister whenever the six month old `Ali Asghar of Karbala was killed. Thus even though she went to the “secular” schools, she, like most Iranians of her position, was more familiar with the language of Karbala and *shabih khāni*, to express her grief. Like Siyahkal, `Azizeh’s little baby sister lost her own body and turned story into a metaphor of social injustice, in leftist literature.

As the two nameless children whose suffocation in the trunk Kafka employs, in his diary, to illustrate his frustration at the dependence of writing on the world, the death of little M`asoumeh came to stand for something else, something abstract, general, something which no longer belonged to a singular skinny body, and a cold pale face. Ironically, like Siyahkal’s characters, M`asoumeh also lost her singularity. She was no longer a particular baby whose laughter from a couple of days before her freezing could be still heard in one’s mind. Instead M`asoumeh became a metaphor, standing for any one and yet no one. Like Siyahkal’s martyrs who became the children of storm, M`asoumeh became a synonym for injustice, poverty, no longer our little, once-flesh and blood, M`asoumeh.

In Kafka’s diary, one’s attention shifts from the heart wrenching image of children’s suffocation to the author’s despair with writing and its dependency on metaphors. The horrific image of children’s suffocation is interrupted by the image of the maid who is putting wood in the fireplace to keep the author warm so he can write. The reality of the children’s death nearly vanishes, as one begins to contemplate Kafka’s expression of despair with writing and the aesthetic, poetics, and politics of this

expression for literature. Both death and children become metaphoric.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, stories like those of `Azizeh's sister entered into books but in not finding their way to the subaltern, they lost their singularity and became materials of literary production. As a metaphor of injustice, they easily lent themselves to utilization by the religious leaders' *shabih khāni*.

Shamloo's poem traveled in small places, between jails and coffee shops, recited either with the taste of blood in the mouths of the tortured prisoner or in the dim light of coffee shops, amid coughs that disrupted hearing and the smoke of cigarettes that tarnished vision. While the Shah could not stop Iranians from commemorating Imam Hussein,¹⁶⁹ Shamloo's poem, even in the dark corners of coffee shops, or in the small gathering of university students, was followed by the watchful eyes and attentive ears of the SAVAK.

The guerrilla movement went further underground to survive suppression, as poetry grew more sophisticated to avoid censorship. The igniters of fire were killed or jailed while neither their burning body nor their poetry seemed to illuminate beyond their own surrounding, under their own name. Shari`ati returned from Paris, as a new *shabih khān*, who reached people's hearts and mind by reading similar to Karbala while

¹⁶⁸ Evidently, Kafka writes of and against the impossibility of writing in the face of this tragedy, the brutal reality of which he cannot describe. It is precisely this impossibility of the indescribable reality of the children's suffocation that turns it into a metaphor for the impossibility of writing without metaphors.

¹⁶⁹ This factor was very well illustrated by the levels of different popularity that two leftist intellectuals, Khosro Golesorkhi and Karamat-ullah Daneshian, acquired after their outspoken defense during their trial. While both of them were arrested, tortured, and put on the same trial, allegedly for the same activity against the Shah's Regime, Golesorkhi utilized the language of Shi'ism and martyrdom and spoke of Imam Ali as the first socialist and of Imam Hussein as the ultimate martyr, in his defense while Daneshian spoke directly of class struggle and Marxism. Daneshian remained limitedly known as a hero by the leftist intellectuals or middle class educated people, while Golesorkhi was widely respected. Even in 2004, during my fieldwork I witnessed young people visiting, or looking for, Golesorkhi's grave in Behshztahra. Interestingly, Daneshian was from a working class background while Golesorkhi was the child of a middle class family.

acquiring all that was attractive in the language of the left and Shamlou's poem. He spoke poetically, close to the heart of middle class intellectuals while retrieving all the familiar sentiments of *shabih khāni*, in its very reinvention. He mended the uneven edges of elite and subaltern religious and cultural values, blended socialism and Islam together with revolutionary rhetoric, in a similar gesture to that of *shabih khāni*. While in its aesthetic appeal, Shari'ati's "*shabih khāni*" resembled Shamlou's poem, its familiar religious metaphors and characters of Karbala allowed him to reach a larger audience. This is not to say that he was comprehended by everyone, but rather that different social groups could relate to different aspects of his views, and as in the *shabih khāni* they could offer their own reenactments of it, in their own language.

As Chelkowski points out, *shabih khāni*'s "genius is that it combines immediacy and flexibility with universality. Uniting rural folk art with urban, royal entertainment, it admits no barriers between the archetype and the human, the wealthy and the poor, the sophisticated and the simple, the spectator and..." and that "Ta'ziyeh has never lost its religious implications" (1979). While Chelkowski is right that *shabih khāni* has not lost its religious implications, it is absolutely critical to recognize the novelty of this particular religiosity that the revolutionary *shabih khāni* generated. More importantly, as I mentioned earlier, there is a great difference between grassroots *shabih khāni* played by local populations and the nationally organized *shabih khāni* of the religious leaders of which Shari'ati was an influential pioneer. In this mass-mediated form of *shabih khāni*, Iranians found themselves at once similar and different to their leaders, singular and yet of a collective. This was not only made possible by the media that project the mass

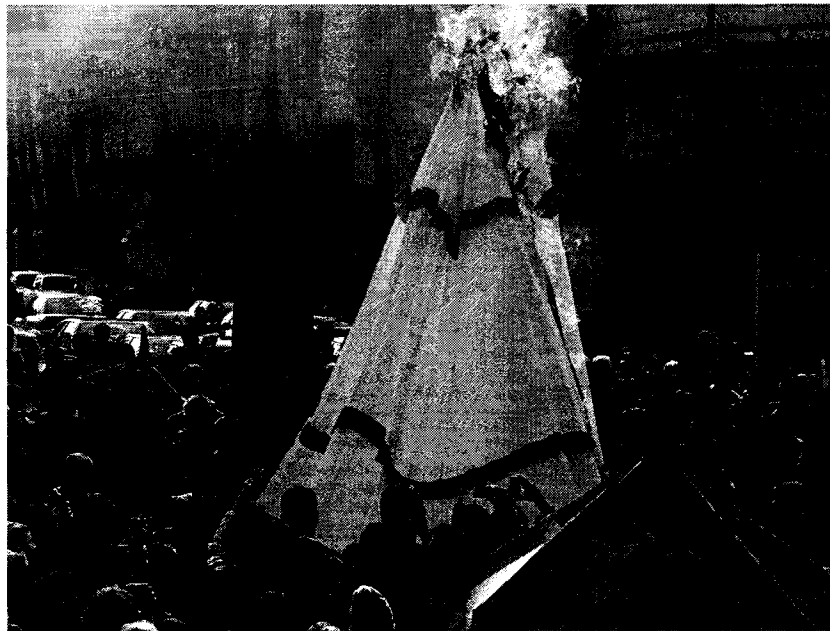
simultaneously as mass and as individual, it is also the capacity of *shabih khāni* that constantly calls for identification with and distancing from that which one reenacts.

Yet, *shabih khāni* is still haunted by the authoritative text and its nomadic readers, including those of Shari`ati and Khomeini. One wonders if the position of “*khāni*” is like that of the “traditional” performers of *shabih khāni*, or the “marginalized” multitude, which are deprived of the space of the “producers,” and invade the spaces of the official discourse, maneuvering around in the momentarily unoccupied territories and leaving traces behind to haunt the “owners”? Was “*khāni*,” like labor, at the service of the *shabih*, which stood for capital, or was it the other way around? The recent history of Iran unravels the intertwined indispensability of one to another.¹⁷⁰ By ignoring this reality, many leftists in Iran ended up not only losing the battle of metaphors, but they also suffered an overwhelming scale of losses of lives and deaths.¹⁷¹ In his simultaneously transgressive and faithful reading of the original story, by incorporating the “*khāni*,” (reading) and the “*shabih*” (similar), Khomeini established a state in which he and the state became the embodiments of Imam Hussein and his companions, fighting all enemies as if they were the troops of Yazid. The difference was that the people of Kufee were redeemed in Iranians. In the new nation-state everyone was to become a Horr, who had turned from Yazid’s camp to Imam Hussein and was redeemed by

¹⁷⁰ Charles Hirschkind (2006) rightly criticizes the way in which scholars of modern mass media have approached the “functions of religious media” in polarized, assumingly contradictory, terms, either as the “deliberative or the disciplinary.” He suggests that this “way of framing the inquiry reflects, in part, a tendency within liberal thought to view the individual as necessarily in conflict with the community and the forms of collective discipline that undergird it” (105-6). In many ways Hirschkind’s point is very much relevant to our discussion of *shabih khāni* and the insufficiency of explaining their relationship by the binary oppositional of transgressive versus conformism.

¹⁷¹ In the previous chapter I have argued that for many of the leftists’ families the issue at stake was not the loss of their loved ones to death but the loss of the recognition of their death, with the horrifying burden of which these families had to live.

martyrdom. Those failing to do so would become Yazidi. This was how Shari`arti envisaged the state of humanity: one is either an ideal citizen by being dead through martyrdom, or speaks out and is captive Zaynabi, or is Yazidi. In his notion, Horr was left out for the only way to become redeemed is to die as a martyr and thus become a Husseini. Yet, new readings of *shabih khāni* and of the poem have emerged alongside the authoritative ones, which we will explore in the transgressive *shabih khāni* of the Iranian youth.



This is a photo from a town in Northwest Iran. It is semi-shabih khāni in which after the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his male companions, the tents are set on fire. These are very new features, for the shabih khāni of my era never set the fire this close to the circle of people.

Chapter 2

Of Maps and Itineraries: Refashioning the Nation in Post-Revolutionary Iran



In Behshtzahra Cemetery

For twenty years I was visiting the wrong grave, since my brother was executed in 60 [1981]. All these years, week after week, we went there. Then, about a year and a half ago, one day I saw another family sitting on his grave. I first thought they were one of those families who had no burial for their martyr, so were visiting other graves. But they had been given the same number as ours. We sat there, all confused, not knowing which one of them was buried there, if not both. I still go there, but it all feels so different now. It is like I've lost him all over again. I feel lost myself. I keep dreaming of him. In my dreams, he walks around with an injured body, his cloths all dirty and worn out. Unkempt and tired he walks aimlessly. Sometimes I see him lying in a dirty ditch; he calls for me, but I never get to do anything for him. My poor brother, he's had no place to rest, even in death, my poor brother (Ashraf, an executed leftist's sister, 2003).

Re/turn To Graves: A Layout of the Future on, and of, the Graveyards



To millions of joyously welcoming Iranians, on February 1st, 1979, Khomeini returned from his fifteen years of exile. Immediately upon landing at the airport, he altered the Welcoming Committee's initial plan to celebrate his historical arrival at "Madreshe-ye Refah," (Refah School). Instead, he directed the Committee members and eventually millions of people to Behesht-e-Zahra¹⁷² Cemetery. Located on the southern outskirts of the city, this cemetery had for years been the main burial ground in Tehran. Then, in 1979, as Borzo Daragahi observed to be true also in February 7, 2002, "most people in Tehran eventually [found] their way to the gigantic Behesht-e Zahra cemetery" ([www. Iranian.com](http://www.Iranian.com)).¹⁷³ Yet, it was during the 1977-1979 uprisings, that it acquired its

¹⁷² I use two different spellings for this cemetery; while "Behsht-e-Zahra" (Zahra's paradise) is its literary form, people commonly refer to it Behshtzahra, omitting the possessive -e, the English 's. Both versions mean Zahra's paradise. Depending on different modes of rendition, I use one or the other.

¹⁷³ Borzo Daragahi writes of his visit to Beheshtzhara in February 7, 2002 in an Iranian website: www.Iranin.com.

unique prestige by embracing the often young bodies of those killed by the Shah's Regime, who were entitled to the status of martyr.

By directing people to the graves of martyrs, Khomeini attempted to organize divergent passages of the past and to ordain major itineraries of the future. The strategy of this direction was reflected in Khomeini's choice of location and the content and the form of his speech on that first day of his arrival. Like a "metaphor," or a "vehicle of mass transportation," his speaking to the living in the presence of ghosts-martyrs linked people and places of the dead and the living together (de Certeau, 1984:115).¹⁷⁴ The modalities of this narrative structure denoted the peculiar motifs of the new configuration of power and the sociopolitical trajectory towards which the "ommat" (the nation) was to be guided.¹⁷⁵ Combined with the entire ambiance of his return,¹⁷⁶ a few key elements in his speech lay out the complex geography of hierarchies and dynamics of power of the new state.

Here, on the grave of revolutionary martyrs, Khomeini declared: "انقلاب ما مديون" (Our Revolution is indebted to martyrs' blood). Nevertheless, a slight addendum to this seemingly transparent assertion, suggesting that martyrs' death had occurred for Islam, introduced inconsistencies in the relations of power between the dead and the living. Prior to the Revolution, various struggles had converged in opposition to

¹⁷⁴ There is a distinct difference between de Certeau's "metaphor" of mass transportation that links people and places together and that which I attribute to Khomeini's speech narrative. For, Khomeini rather maps out directions. He does not simply ride on them but sets the terms of their ride for people.

¹⁷⁵ While it is true that martyrdom was constantly encouraged both discursively and pragmatically, both during the revolution and in agreeing to end the Iran-Iraq War, Khomeini offered rationalities which limited self-sacrificing acts. In this regard see: *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran*, by Charles Kurzman 2004, Harvard University Press.

¹⁷⁶ By the entire ambiance of his return, I mean all its elements, from content, intonations, form, audience, etc.

the Shah.¹⁷⁷ The dominant attitude towards those dissidents killed by the Shah's Regime had been to honor them as martyrs regardless of their religious inclinations.¹⁷⁸ Yet, tensions and disagreements lurked behind these apparent commonalities. In fact, this was not the first time that martyrdom was perceived solely in relationship to Islam, nor was Khomeini the pioneer of such an articulation. Yet, his exceptionally popular status at the time he delivered this historic speech on the graves of martyrs rendered this connection to Islam uncontestable.

This chapter traverses the discriminatory experiences and spaces that were mapped out and constrained by the "spatial syntaxes," to borrow from de Certeau, of Khomeini's return narrative.¹⁷⁹ By glancing at a couple of historical episodes, including Khomeini's return from exile and his death, this chapter investigates the manner in which the normative boundaries of a new nation-state were reconstructed. The discursive analysis of these meta-narratives aims to elucidate those particular regimes of truth that were deployed to construct the boundaries of body politics and refashion new citizenry. I hope to illuminate the ways in which these "narrative syntaxes" continue to regulate, create links with, and are unfailingly interrupted by, the lived experiences and stories of the people.

Khomeini's decision to draw millions of entranced people to the cemetery and his direct linking of martyrdom to Islam, testified to the absolute indispensability of the dead

¹⁷⁷ The history of tensions among political Islamic and Marxist organizations in contemporary Iran is intense and irresolute.

¹⁷⁸ While the term martyr was used by the Left and the religious groups and individuals prior to the Revolution, in the last few years its usage has no longer been perceived as unproblematic. Several factors might explain this shift. The effect of the dominant view of martyrdom rendering it a predominantly religious term has certainly been essential in this turn. Yet, for the families of dissidents, who live in Iran, this term has a practical bearing, having to do with the law that does not allow the destruction of martyrs' graves.

¹⁷⁹ I use this phrase "return narrative" as a short cut to refer to the entire event of the day of his return.

to the peculiar topography of the new system of hierarchies. This choice also symbolized and inferred the productive and instrumental role that both groups of official and unofficial martyrs were to play in the foundation of the state and the safeguarding of its power structures.¹⁸⁰ His speech extended the boundaries of state surveillance all the way into the grave. Rather than being left to their death, the dead were to be remolded, as were the living, in accordance with the new regimes of power and knowledge. This first national rendezvous on the graves of martyrs, rather than in an educational institution, also underscored the ambivalent venues from which the “mellat” (nation)/“ommat” (the community of the Muslims),¹⁸¹ was addressed. Addressing people from the space of death was neither a mere expression of reverence for the martyrs, nor did it imply a forthright return to the “old” notion of martyrdom. Imperative to the formation of this particular modern nation-state, its avowal of territorial power, and its claim of legitimacy, was, in fact, not a return, but a re-turn to death and most specifically to martyrdom.

The re-turn to martyrdom and its numerous and untimely deaths was portrayed by the dominant discourse as a continuation and reenactment (*shabih khāni*) of the Karbala Event. This notion of martyrdom materialized during the Iran-Iraq War and under the regime’s political suppression within the country, in the blood of hundreds of thousands of often young men and women. While the state-approved self-sacrifices were honored as “shahidān-e- moghaddas” (holy martyrs), those of the state’s opponents were labeled as “mohārebin-e-madoun” (the executed warriors against God). The gestures and significations of hegemonic discourses and practices, manifested in the systematic

¹⁸⁰ Speaking of these categories as a homogeneous single body sacrifices the multidimensionality and complexities within these groups. Yet these arbitrary categories are hereby used to simply manage the discussion.

¹⁸¹ These terms were often interchangeably utilized by Khomeini.

dismissal of one group of sacrifices from the public eye while rendering the other hyper-visible, were already present and represented in Khomeini's historical speech on the day of his arrival.¹⁸² The hierarchical recognition of these deaths as the mirror image of the lives of the living and the sketches, if not the blue print of their future as dead, is the means of creating peculiarly unconventional yet habitual citizens. As such, the death of the state martyrs was perceived as a simulation of the sacrifices of the martyrs of Karbala, as reparation for their blood, and as new offerings. Deemed as waste, the burning ashes of the unrecognized losses and sacrifices of the dissidents, on the other hand, remained under the surface, haunting and undermining the superficially imposed unity of the community.

Hence, in this chapter, the dominant narrative of the state will be constantly interrupted by other stories and venues. The reader will travel between trajectories and structures mapped out by Khomeini and the state's territorial narrative, and the spatial practices of the people.¹⁸³ While the state narrative works on the level of "strategy," the individuals' "spatial practices," presented in this chapter, are concerned with "everyday

¹⁸² I do not mean to suggest that Khomeini was the sole decision maker, nor am I trying to undermine the interactive factors which were involved in the process of the formation of the new state. Not only other leaders, but most importantly, the revolutionary spirit of the people had a decisive impact in determining the courses of the events, even assigning roles to Khomeini that he himself might not have overseen. I am using the first day rather as symbolic moment, in my tale of origin. I believe though that the figure of a leader, in critical moments of a mass movement, like this return episode, embodies and becomes iconic in convergence of all reflections, images, and dreams. The projection of these complex fusions of emotions is often transpired in the extreme popularity of a charismatic figure of the leader. Khomeini's talent was to draw these diverse images together by appealing to a language and referents that was shared by most Iranians.

¹⁸³ Thus the reader might feel the unevenness of this journey between these disparate, though interrelated, spatial trajectories, between the dominating, panoptical, and homogenizing, rhetoric of the state, and the spatial stories and stories of spaces of people which move within spaces and make temporary links. While the former tends to territorialize and possesses, the latter passes by and leaves traces without settling in. The stories of the people are produced by "walkers," who by their very walking "on the ground level" (de Certeau, 1984: 97), and "below the threshold at which visibility begins (ibid: 93), create new itineraries and redefine borders.

tactics” (de Certeau, 1984: 115). As the voice of the state, Khomeini’s rhetoric delimits, territorializes, and regulates people and places. Yet, people and their stories travel in the gap between these imposed maps and realities of itineraries. The trajectories of these practices are numerous, though singular, active, but usually invisible, constrained, yet constantly disruptive of regulation. They take new routes, make detours, and create their own links, without mapping out places.¹⁸⁴ They do not “merely constitute a ‘supplement’ to dominant discourses, nor are they simply “satisfied with displacing” or “transposing them” (ibid: 116). In this chapter, I hope to shed light on the ways in which in their daily experiences and practices, Iranians, particularly the subjects of the violent events of war and political suppression, organize and make their own journey.

These “travel stories”¹⁸⁵ also elucidate the ways in which the systems of hierarchies are produced within, and as a prerequisite to, the construction of the post-revolutionary nation-state in Iran. They unravel those spatial practices by which the families of the dissidents and state martyrs poach and transgress dominant discourses and their regulating codes of conduct. This chapter explores the intersections between these distinctive and inseparable spatial stories, and their “more or less tightly or easily” made linkages, in everyday practices (de Certeau, 1984:115). It also traces those constructive and inculcating characteristics that shaped and were shaped by the hegemonic structure and those divergent trajectories specifically organized, and epitomized in, the stratified locales of the dead.

¹⁸⁴ De Certeau makes a distinction between space and place. He defines place as that which “delimits a field.” A “place excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place)” (117). It “implies an indication of stability.” A space, on the other hand, “exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables.” Space, is therefore “composed of intersections of mobile elements.” In this sense, space is a “practiced place,” an itinerary actualized (1984: 117).

¹⁸⁵ De Certeau suggests that “every story is a travel story” (1984:115).

Invisible Tears, Lost Graves, and Castrated Revolution

For many of the families of the leftists or secular opponents of the Shah, Khomeini's notion of martyrdom, which marked the exclusion of their martyrs and the dismissal of their sacrifices, spoiled the euphoria of the historical revolutionary moment of his return. More than two decades later, Manžar, a leftist dissident and a former inmate under the Shah, still felt that "bitter taste" in her "mouth" while recalling the non-acknowledgement of her family and friends' sacrifices in Khomeini's speech. On that day, having recently been released from years of imprisonment, Manžar stood in the cemetery and listened to Khomeini, while "in fury [she] thought of all the suffering her entire family had lived through because of their opposition not just to the Shah but also his father's regime."

Now in her early 50s, Manžar was telling me of her memory when as a little girl the secret police had raided her home in the middle of the night. She still remembered the horror, confusion, and chaos of that long night at the end of which her father and uncle were taken to jail. Many more raids and arrests would occur after that one, such that "it became part of my experience of growing up," so she said. The memory of that shocking experience and the confusion of that first night for the little girl would remain vivid in her mind, especially because it was the first time "in my life that I realized people could be taken away without ever coming back. From that jail my uncle didn't come back." In her then large extended family, more detentions would end in no return, not only under the Shah, but under the new Regime. Now in poor health, Manžar summarized her life thus:

My family had become a familiar target for SAVAK (the Shah's secret police) and then for this Regime. It didn't matter to them

whether it was day or night; they would raid our house and take one, a few, or all of my family with them. So under the Shah, and of course this regime, all of us, even my parents and relatives ended up in prison at least once, some of us for years. Those of us who survived, as you see, still suffer from our injuries and grievances.

I visited Manžar in February 2004, only a couple of days before the 25th anniversary of the Revolution. Because of the occasion, the all government-run television was even more saturated than usual with programs that selectively told the stories of the days leading to the Revolution, with Khomeini's return as their highlight.¹⁸⁶ While such propagandist visits to the past are often ignored by the majority of people, especially the youngsters who were born after the Revolution, they rekindle the bitter tastes and memories of that era in the minds of those who paid high prices for their dissidence to the Shah, but were excluded by the new rulers. In Manžar's living room, frozen in their photographs, from every wall, the eyes of her executed young husband, brothers, and other executed family members stared at us. As though reliving her experience of that day all over again, it so seemed that Manžar was inviting me to live it with her.

Now imagine how I feel when Khomeini refers to martyrs only as those who have died for Islam. I am standing in the cemetery where my brother, my cousin, and several of my friends are buried, listening to this nonsense. How am I supposed to feel? Everyone is so excited about Khomeini's return. It is as though he is this magician who will change everything for better. How can you even dare to say anything against him? People will pull your tongue out; put your eyes out of their sockets, if you oppose him. Also we don't want to cause a break within the revolutionary front. So I stand there, thinking of my martyred brother, uncles, cousins, and friends, as he sweeps away their sacrifices. If others cried for joy that day, I cried for grief and

¹⁸⁶ Almost never the leftist guerrillas' armed attack to the Shah's last stronghold, Special Guard base, is almost never shown, nor is the moment of the occupation of the radio station, thus the announcement of the victory of the Revolution. These episodes are depicted with missing footage covering only the events after the religious leadership takes over.

agony. But nobody saw my tears. My tears were hidden inside me, like my heart's words and grief. I 'cried blood' (khoon geryeh kardam). Right there and then I knew that I had not just lost my loved ones, but also our Revolution.

I noticed that, as though leaping over the distance from February 1979 to February 2004, Manžar had suddenly begun to speak of her experience, in reflection, in the past tense.

Under the Shah, we had learned to live as invisible. But during the Revolution, we thought it was all going to change; at least we didn't expect things to go so badly so early on. But not only were we already shedding invisible tears, but we had become invisible again. That day, my heart bled as people chanted: 'In the spring of freedom, green is the place of martyrs' (dar bahār-e- āzādi, jāye shohadā khāli), for our martyrs were really missing. The 'spring of freedom' hadn't come for us. Our Revolution had been stopped. They castrated the revolution (enghelabo akhteh kardan). Its victory never came. They harvested its unripe fruits. People never got what they had fought for. They dyed the sparrow and presented it to people as a canary. Like the life of our young martyrs, our spring of freedom was also cut short; all that blood was wasted: their sacrifices were dismissed.

Revolutionary Reenactment

The seeds of the discriminatory discourses and practices regarding martyrs and their graves were implanted early on during the Revolution in a particular perception of Islam as the sole umbrella under which myriad revolutionary dreams were to either merge or die away. In the euphoric atmosphere of the time, Khomeini's shrewdly ambiguous yet monotonous reading of the history of Shi'ism, and its mythohistory of the Karbala Event, could not but acquire public support. As with the language of the clergy that draws upon elements from various literary genres and colloquial vernaculars to reach different layers of the populace, Khomeini's interpretation also keenly fused novel features, masked under the aura of the familiar, with the old concepts, presented as

innovative. While the old in new outfits was embraced by the revolutionary spirits as radical, the new hiding behind the old masks offered comfort to those nostalgic for stability and for the glory of the long gone past.

In this fusion of the old and the new, the alluring force of the Revolution was sustained while its unfamiliar and unconventional edges were smoothed down. The revolutionary events appeared as though they were structured improvisations. They resembled the Iranian classic artistic productions, from poetry, music, miniature painting, to carpet designs, in their delicate *mélange* of creativity and structured precision. Above all, this notion of Revolution was reminiscent of the annual commemoration of the Karbala Event, and its semi-theatrical religious reenactments (*shabih khāni*), which is ingrained in Iranians' memories.¹⁸⁷ The revolutionary "episodes" were to be "staged," under habitual and rehearsed disguises, as if reenactments of a recurring plot. In *shabih khāni*, the participants' personal grievances are concealed under, and channeled towards, the expression of intense emotions for the sufferings of Karbala martyrs. Likewise, the mourning for and commemoration of the revolutionary martyrs mingled with and evoked the stories of the archetypal Karbala Event, with an intensified zeal, and vice versa.

A central characteristic of "*shabih khāni*" is its mobility in time and space, and its episodic, rather than chronological, narration of stories, with a single focal point: the Karbala Event. Hence, in a "*shabih khāni*," Adam, the first human being, might appear

¹⁸⁷ The reenactments of Karbala Event (*shabih khāni*) that emerged during the Shah era, in the 1970s, and still goes on, is radically different from that which used to occur, mainly in the villages and small towns. The *Shabih Khāni* that took place, every year, in the first ten days of the month of Moharram, during which the third Shī'i Imam and his companions were martyred, was a collective, participatory, embodied practice. What is now staged in theatres or broadcast on television, no longer limited to the month of Moharram, is a modernized, traditionalized, theatrical production, in which the former commemorators-mourners are divided into actors and spectators. Despite this transformation, the familiarity and the memory of this event still persist in the minds of all Iranians. The difference between the two forms might be compared to the way one feels familiar with a place in which one has lived before, and the one through images, in photographs or movies.

on the stage at the same time as a Western foreign agent.¹⁸⁸ Similarly, the revolutionary religious leaders were adept at moving between and within various spatial/temporalities. They manipulated the diverse events of the past, present, and even future, so that they all came to be associated with, and encompassed by, the Revolution. The Revolution itself was portrayed in connection to the Karbala Event. These leaders succeeded in creating a sense in which the mythohistory of Shi'ism, particularly the trope of Karbala, appeared as the central narrative, while it was in fact incorporated into, and at the service of, the Revolution. They achieved the complicated task of representing the Revolution and the "Original" Shi'i Narrative as both central to and in the service of one another. This was made possible by constructing a complex notion of history in which the present events were depicted, simultaneously, as simulations, reenactments, and continuations of those of the Shi'i history. The emergence of Khomeini and some other clergy members as the dominant leaders was mainly due to this ambivalent representation of the revolutionary movement as the staging of a repeating plot, which returned anew through the "rehearsed spontaneity"¹⁸⁹ of its characters. Revolution appeared as at once a reenactment of and anticipated by the Original history. The boundaries of actions and reenactments were thus blurred.

¹⁸⁸ See "Debating Muslims" by Fischer and Abedi about this fusion of events and agents in "*shabih khāni*." Similarly, pioneered by Ali Shari'ati, the language of Shi'ism and Marxism were molded into that of the revolutionary discourse, while both were innovated and reinvented. The former was portrayed as a return to its authentic form in the past; the latter was turned against itself. Khomeini's astute response to the celebration of Labor Day was also an example of this apt incorporation of elements, while turning against themselves. Instead of writing off the Iranian calendar, he decided to incorporate and institutionalize the day, yet altering its customary meaning and significance. In his lecture, which was broadcasted through loudspeakers on the streets, he at once undermined and made a mockery of the special emphasis of the Marxists on workers, as claiming a higher respect for workers in Islam. He suggested that, in Islam, everything and everyone from God, to the "molecules of atoms," and even he, were labor. Therefore, according to Khomeini everyday was a Labor Day. Ervand Abrahamian, in his book, *Khomeinism*, traces the many ways in which Marxism was incorporated by the Islamic Republic.

¹⁸⁹ Saba Mahmood, 2002 and 2005.

In this complex mythohistory, through meandering within different spatial/temporal and discursive arenas, the objectives of the present seemed linked to an original history; the here and now, and the eternity of a primordial “historicity” converged. From this fusion of shi`i tropes and revolutionary ideas resurfaced the notion of martyrdom as an act of self-sacrifice for Islam. Khomeini’s speech on the day of his return worked as the initiation ceremony, a rite of passage, and transformed this discursive notion into an institutionalized dogma. Its complex structural syntaxes, ordering techniques, and links, permitted the enemies of the new state to be fought in a strange manner: rehearsed and detached, as if in a theatrical reenactment, yet with such vigor and intense hostility that they seemed intended to eliminate the incarnations of all the murderers of all the righteous Shi`is of all times. Such a performative notion of history also legitimized the eradication of enemies not merely as threats to the state, but as a means of avenging the blood of the early Shi`i martyrs and as a way for the nation to rise up as a righteous Islamic community, the “ommat.” From the outset, the internal tensions and the external wars were to be represented as related and stretched across time and space to the original conflicts, most specifically to the Battle of Karbala.

Contrasting Spatial Stories and Trajectories

The shrinking and expanding boundaries of the united community of the “ommat” were to be adjusted and fixed in relation to and against this constantly reincarnated enemy. Under the pretext of maintaining a “united community” (ommat-e- vāhed) and its “unity of the word” (vahadat-e kalameh), divergent voices were silenced, even before the new regime was commenced. For people like Zohreh, the exclusion of alternative

voices and imagined revolutionary trajectories signified “the hijacking of the Revolution by the religious clergy.”

This “hijacking” of the Revolution, “was made possible” so Zohreh tells me, “because of the usual tricks mullas have historically played on people. They are so good at saying something but doing another thing, in changing their words in a way that fits their ends. They could’ve taught Machiavelli better than he taught the king.” In Zohreh’s view, “that Khomeini fooled the Westerners—even Foucault ‘beat his chest behind him’ (posht-e-saresh sineh zad) [marched behind him]—was not unexpected.”¹⁹⁰ For Zohreh, “what was really outrageous was that we [the left in Iran] were so drowned (ghargh) in Revolutionary activities that we ignored these realities. That we didn’t see, or saw and ignored the dreadful future he was leading us to; this was the most ridiculous and painful thing.”

The ambiguity in Khomeini’s words, according to Zohreh, “was present even in Paris when he was making promises that even the left would have the freedom of expression in his regime. The covering up of his real intentions and plans,” so Zohreh says, “was to get a larger mass to obey his orders and march in his direction.” Zohreh refers to this gap between his words and acts, in a Persian idiom, as “mullā’s blanket” (lahāf-e-mullā),¹⁹¹ which she says “was visible all along” behind his ‘ambiguous words’ (harfhā-ye-do pahloo), but “intellectuals naively ignored it.” The “lahāf”—the sign of his lies—“lay there behind everything he said, but we just refused to see it. Our cemeteries

¹⁹⁰ She is referring to Foucault’s writing in support of Khomeini in the years before and early after the Revolution which were translated in Farsi. Many Iranians non-Iranian scholars have written on his views, such as Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson’s “The Seductions of Islamism: Revisiting Foucault and the Iranian Revolution” (2004).

¹⁹¹ This idiom alludes to a story of Mullā Nasraddin in which he tries to hide his act but his blanket reveals his lie.

and our hearts are now branded by the heavy price we paid for our ‘stupid naivety’ (hemāghat-e-sādelohāneh), Zohreh suggests.

“But not everyone had missed seeing the ‘lahāf,’” as Zohreh and I are reminded by Sorrayā, a former inmate and a widow of an executed leftist. “There were many of us who saw where he was taking the Revolution and tried to pull it away, Sorrayā tells us. “I for one didn’t even go to the cemetery when Khomeini returned but,” she pauses briefly,

But you know how it was then. If you talked to people in person, they agreed with you. But the power of a million marching together, that’s a different story. It was as though some strange force was driving people around. The religious leaders’ chants targeted people’s deep emotions and beliefs. When a young man was killed and they chanted: ‘This is our Ali Akbar’ (In Ali Akbar-e- mast), everyone related to it. All their lives people have cried for Imam Hussein’s Ali Akbar.¹⁹² Their chants were familiar and general. Didn’t matter if they meant different things to different people, when chanted by all, it brought them all together.

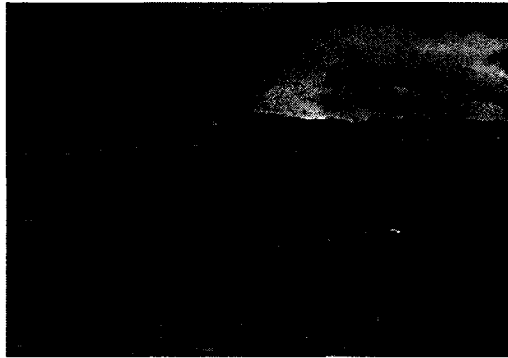
In Sorrayā’s description of the chants that everyone shouts, with different imaginations of its trajectories, the Athenians’ “metaphor” as “the means of mass transportation” returns (de Certeau, 1984: 115). But Sorrayā’s spatial story of the revolution fell out of the dominant trajectory. She relates the story of this falling out, interestingly, in the metaphor of a train.

Their trick was to cover up the differences under their ambivalent, all-encompassing chants, and they succeeded. We were left out of the train even before it had reached its destination. Even when “Cheirkā” (a militant leftist Organization) and “Mojahedā”¹⁹³ (a militant Islamic

¹⁹² Ali Akbar was a young male companion of Imam Hussein who was killed in Karbala. During the month of Moharram, his death is mourned by people and also any young man killed in Iran is mourned as an Ali Akbar.

¹⁹³ She uses the commonly shortened version of the title of these Organizations. The complete title is “Sāzemān-e-Cherikhā-ye Fadāyee-e-Khalgh-e-Iran,” which means Iraian People’s Self-sacrificing

Organization with Marxist leanings) helped the air force officers and organized attacks on the regime's military bases; even when we led and occupied the radio and TV stations, and fought for the final collapse of the regime; even when we participated in guarding the neighborhoods, in occupying Evin, [political prison], we were still left behind and ignored by these leaders. The rules and the directions were all set by them, months earlier; we fought, died and still we had no say in the direction of the Revolution; they forced us into invisible corners, to lag behind. From ignoring to sacrificing us, for them, the distance was less than two years. They couldn't wait to immolate us. You're right Zohreh. This cemetery is the price, not of our stupidity, but of our lack of resources and skill, for our failure to better connect to people, for not being able to show them what lay under the blanket (lahāf). We paid with our own lives, but so did others. Not only Khāvarān, but Beheshtzahra shows the price of our Revolution being hijacked."



An indecisive morning in Khavaran: the battle of clouds and sun

It was a hot summer day in 2003, when Zohreh and I walked on the barren cemetery of Khavaran and spoke about the Revolution and its aftermath. Both Zohreh and Sorrayā walked me through these trajectories, showing their realities by pulling back into their metaphorical referent, the “blanket” (lahāf), the evocative surface of this flat, unmarked cemetery. Like the “lahāf-mullā,” this blanket was also to conceal, but in its very concealment, it exposed the fact of concealing the bodies and stories buried in these “blanketed” graves. Under this worn-out blanket lay two of Zohreh’s three executed

guerrillas Organization, and the shortened version of “Sāzemān-e-Mojāhedīn-e-Khalgh-e-Iran” (Iranian People’s Warriors’ Organization).

brothers, at least so the state officials claimed.¹⁹⁴ As Zohreh spoke of them, I imagined the blanket being gradually pulled away. I could see the lives and the deaths of her brothers unraveling, as if the dead were emerging out of the graves. I could now see this place, no longer as a flat barren land, but as a graveyard; I could imagine real people, who once lived now lying in their graves. It was as if I could see Hamid, my late husband, in his grave, finally dead, finally resting. Was this why these families fight so hard for markers, for tombstones, for some way to demarcate this place as a real cemetery, within which real dead bodies and real once-lived lives were buried, in their untimely and unrecognized deaths?

Regardless of the absence of markers and tombstones, the presence of families on Friday mornings, their flowers covering the grounds, and the unusually gigantic ants--who run around busily, making one wonder what they feed on--mark this landscape as an unusual cemetery. Here and there the ground is cracked, from dryness and heat. No trees offer their shade to the visitors. As Mrs. Rohani, the mother of two executed leftist martyrs, says, "the scorching sun drives even stray dogs to look for a shady corner." Dryness and cracks in the ground are also reflected on the faces and the lips of the families who stay a little longer. Nobody comes here to spend an entire day with the dead, as people do in Behshtzahra.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Even in those cases where the families of executed dissidents are told of a location of the grave, there is no decisive evidence that their loved ones are really buried wherever they are told. For they are not given the body, nor are they involved in the burying process, which occurs secretly. Some families have taken the risk in those early years of political suppression and dug the graves to find out if their loved ones were really buried in them.

¹⁹⁵ Even in other regular cemeteries this is a possibility. Although none of them offer as many accommodations to the visitors as Behshtzahra, but there are enough facilities to spend a day or many hours with one's dead. "I go there and sit on his grave and talk to him until my heart feels light," my mother tells me on the phone, about visiting my father's grave. If I don't talk to him about my feelings, I feel really heavy in heart the entire week. I go there mostly for me. Of course I can't stand the idea of him being alone, but I need to talk with him. When I finish talking with him, I go to the Imamzadeh, [a saint's shrine

To come here for a short visit, wary, all along, of the risks of arrests and harassment, visitors must have strong motivation and personal connections to the dead. Aside from the direct insults of the state, and nature's crude reality--scorching heat in summers, bitter cold in winter, and frequent storms, none of which undermine the astonishing beauty, particularly the gorgeous mountains under whose feet this bleak landscape lies--there are other dangers inherent to this remote, non-residential area. The stories of crimes and run-on rapes of Afghan children, which had been going on for years and finally recently came into the open and even entered discussion in Parliament,¹⁹⁶ because of their scandalous magnitude, are only some of the perils of this "neighborhood." Not merely these segregated graveyards, but also the very occurrences and concealments of incidents like that of the marginal Afghan children, demarcate the topographies of divergent revolutionary dreams forced into unison with the formation of a nation-state. These trajectories also dominated my journey with Mr. Sho`aee, once a leftist, who now speaks of himself as someone who "just wants to live his life." Mr. Sho`aee's sense of humor mollifies the sharp edges of horrific realities by mixing them with laughter.

located in the cemetery], and perform my pilgrimage, and then go to the mosque, [also located in the cemetery] and perform my prayers, talk to other women and in the evening, before it gets dark, I come back home."

¹⁹⁶ This event occurred in Ghiyām Dasht, the area within which Khāvarān Cemetery is located; a large number of mainly Afghani children and teenagers, boys and girls, were raped and killed, while for a long time arrests and releases were kept secretive. The rumors, and some state officials' hints, suggested that it was an organized crime in which some state officials were involved. The body parts of these victims were sold. The incident reminds one of Michael Taussig's remarks about police policing and concealing its own corruption (2003).

Oscillating subjectivities: the Circulation of belonging and non-belonging

In Mr. Sho`āee's humorous version of the revolutionary journey, the divisive mechanism utilized by the revolutionary leaders imposed a cyclical trajectory on his life.

Mr. Sho`āee explained this process as:

In this cyclical process, before the Revolution, those of us involved in the Revolution but not fitting in their ideal 'ommat' were used but ignored. They could not yet directly attack us. They still needed us to march and die for their revolution. Also, people saw us marching with them; they saw our friends' dead bodies on the street. So, these leaders could not yet easily eliminate us. Instead they managed to overshadow us, make us invisible, faceless. We were to march and die but not in our voices and bodies; as ourselves we didn't exist.

In 2004, it had become possible for Dr. Sho`āee, a successful surgeon, to sit in his suit and tie and joke about the way he and people like him ended up "circling around and coming back" to their position of invisibility of the revolutionary era. In a humorous tone, he suggested that:

Before the Revolution, these lords didn't yet have the terms for us, but we were treated as "obsoletes" (bikhodiyā) anyway. With the Shah's regime not yet gone, the terms to divide the enemy and the friend were still the terms of Karbala Event, "Yazidis" and "Husseinis." Those on the Shah's side were 'yazidis' (those who belonged to the camp of Yazid). As always, the "mullās" got the good seats in the camp of Hussein, except that they got to play the victims while enjoying the privileges." We were neither. But after the Revolution, especially during the War, they grabbed the moment and crowned us as "yazidis."

Imitating the tone of an "epical narrator" (naghghāl),¹⁹⁷ Mr. Sho`āee went on:

"But then came the end of the War, the era of reconstruction (dore-ye-bāz sāzi). The state became creative and invented new terms to divide people into "those who belong" (khodiyā), and "those who do

¹⁹⁷ Naghghāli is an old artistic form in Iran in which the epical stories, specially from Ferdosi's Book of the Kings are narrated in "traditional" coffee shops, in a particular epical tone, while pointing to illustrations of the scenes on a large board on the wall.

not belong” (nā khodiyā). In between the two they draw a “red line” (khatt-e-ghermez).¹⁹⁸ Like our childhood games, crossing this line meant failing. After they got rid of the Left, with many people wanting to have nothing to do with politics, there are now a large group of people for whom they have no fixed category or title. So, to assist them I’ve come up with a nice label. I call us “obsoletes” (bikhodiyā), the very thing they tried to make us into before the Revolution. Isn’t this really a suitable label?

When I asked him how these two situations could be seen as the same, he responded:

Of course there is a huge difference between then and now, the difference between the earth and the sky’ (tafāvot az zamin tā āsemāan). Before the Revolution, they couldn’t turn us into “nā khodi” but they saw us that way. Now we do nothing that poses a danger to them, though they would love to chisel us into their “khodiyā,” which is shrinking everyday. The funny thing is that our camp, of the bikhodiyā, is growing so fast that soon they would push many of us into that of “nā khodiā.”

These divisions and vacillating subjectivities were imperative to the construction of the new nation-state and its ordering trajectories. Within this imaginary “ommat” all citizens were to be united, divided, made invisible and hyper-visible, in short, molded to fit a pre-set image; the embodiment of this ideal citizen was the state martyr. For Zohreh this “sectarianism epitomized the violence of Khomeini’s verdict, the ‘Unity of the Word’ (Vahdat-e-Kalamah),¹⁹⁹ which was “evident even before the Revolution, when we demanded the release of all political prisoners, while a small group of religious protesters chanted: ‘Free Muslim prisoners.’” This was “really agonizing” for Zohreh “not only

¹⁹⁸ Except “bikhodiyā” which is his invention, the terms Mr. Sho’aei uses are common in political debates, in Iran.

¹⁹⁹ The spelling of the term here matches its pronunciation by Khomeini. In the formal and colloquial Farsi of Tehrani speakers it is pronounced as “vahadat-e-kalameh), with an “e” rather than “a” before the “h” in the end. I would refer to these different forms according to their usages.

because most prisoners were leftists, but because they were accusing the left of sectarianism.” In Zohreh’s experience “the moment they achieved dominance, they dictated their views to the entire movement. Once they forced me out of a demonstration for being unveiled.” The calling for the “unity of the word” (*vahdat-e kalameh*), in Zohreh’s view, “was a way of simply telling us to shut up.” After the state was founded, the preservation of this fetishistic “*vahdat*” intensified the bitterness.

Yet the Marxian perception of false consciousness implied in the views expressed by Zohreh, Sorraya, and Manzar, according to which people were fooled by the cunning religious leaders, is contradicted and complicated by the multiplicity of different subjects and subjectivities. Not only do the experiences of the revolution vary for different people, but subjectivities and memories of subjects are transformed and recreated. The potential and capacity of the personal and collective memories that converged in a mass movement--thanks to advanced media technology--cannot be overestimated. Iranians’ strong support of the religious leaders during the revolutionary era might be seen, not as a sign of their false consciousness, but as an indication of their personal disillusionment with the Shah’s regime which found a language for expression in a fetishistic mythohistory of an archetypal Event of Karbala.²⁰⁰ Khomeini’s views were “revealed,” not in a vacuum or a *tabula rasa*, but rather through the dominantly and collectively shared discourses for which the Karbala Event was an enduring sociopolitical, religious and personal referent.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ In upcoming chapters I will elucidate my view of this fetishistic history of origin.

²⁰¹ One might compare this to the shared, yet divergent, nostalgia of most first generation Iranians abroad for particular vocalists or songs from the Shah’s era. While these vocalists might bring people together, the feelings and the memories they evoke vary for different individuals, depending on their “personal” experiences.

The influence of Khomeini's notion of martyrdom, and "the fruits" he collected by his "ambiguous words," were made possible and renegotiated within a specific cultural, religious historical background. Like a text, this history was available to and shared by nearly all Iranians. Yet, like any text, in being read, it inevitably multiplied and was multiple. Hence, both Khomeini's definition of martyrdom, in its exclusivity to Islam, and the boundaries of the State's hegemonic discourse have been reconstructed on a daily basis.²⁰² His notion of martyrdom was intertwined with his project of constructing a new nation-state and its need for modified citizens, which formed provocative and key element of his speech on the graves.

The Rulers and the Roles of Refashioning the Nation

”ما آمده ایم شماره آدم کنیم“ (We have come to make you into human beings), so proclaimed Khomeini to the millions of cheering and crying Iranians in that day of his return to Iran. How paradoxical it might sound that the members of a nation about to topple a regime “armed to its teeth,” whose Revolution was soon to be surmised as a “miracle” and an “explosion of the light” in Khomeini's own words, were perceived by him as nonhuman. Khomeini's assertion appears particularly bizarre, for it is neither into “the universal human” (basher), nor into “the conscious human” (ensān), but into the base and basic “human species,” into (ādam),²⁰³ he suggests, these very people, whose sacrifices had made his return possible, needed to be chiseled!²⁰⁴

²⁰² The discourse of martyrdom itself offers an example of the multiplicity of its readings. People in Bam decorate their dead ones, who died in the earthquake, with the title of martyrdom. Families of executed dissidents argue that their dead ones are martyrs, while still others have begun utilizing new terms. The state refers to its officials' death, even in accidents, as martyrdom. Roxanne Varzi's recent book *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, And Martyrdom in Post-Revolutionary Iran* (2006) discusses the fading status of martyrdom among the middle class youth. While my own fieldwork seconds her, in a general sense, my chapter on youth and their jokes about martyrs will show the complexity of their status.

²⁰³ In Farsi, there are three different words for human being. While “ādam” distinguishes human from animals as species, “ensān” implies a higher level of being which by possessing consciousness is radically

This contradiction was recalled in 2004 by Mr. Akbari, a cab driver and once a zealous supporter of the Regime and a member of the *basij* (voluntary para-military organization). Unable to make ends meet on his meager teaching salary and frustrated by the way that in “those early years after the Revolution, students and teachers had turned into spies against one another,” Mr. Akbari had left his teaching job and his *basiji* affiliation to become a cab driver. “They liked us to turn into “sheep dogs” (*sage-galleh*), Mr. Akbari cynically suggested. As he drove me to my destination, caught in a heavy traffic jam, he spoke about those early years. “In their minds, people were wild stray dogs, and had to be converted into sheep dogs.” Turning towards the back seat of his nearly forty year old car, where I was sitting, he grinningly asked me: “You know the difference, don’t you?” and himself explained: “Sheep dogs are trained to follow orders; they attack or stay quiet as they are trained. But stray dogs act on their own sense of danger. These “Misters” (*āghāyān*) wanted us to become sheep dogs.”

His subsequent explanation clarified his conception of the state’s re-definition of citizenry and religion when, without a pause, he continued. “We were Muslims before they came. But these “*ākhunds*” (the semi-derogatory title for clergy members) acted as if we weren’t. In their eyes, people were humans only if they fit into their “Muslimhood” (*musalmāni*).” Thus, his distinction was not meant to separate people from dogs, but

different from animals and from the base “*ādam*.” The term “*bashar*” refers to the universal human, when “*ensāns*” realize their common humanity. *Bashar* is often used in international declarations as in “*hoghough-e bashar*,” (human rights). It is though not totally uncommon to use *ādam* to mean the other two, in colloquial language.

²⁰⁴ Khomeini’s usage of the term *ādam* is nevertheless rooted in his deep knowledge of Qu`ran, in which, according to Hussein Frozanfar, Enasan is always mentioned negatively while *ādam* has positive connotation. This has to do, I believe, with the relational question of that to which each category is being compared. While *bani ādam* (the children of *Ādam*) are compared to animals and even angels and in that sense are seen as superior and closer to God, as *ensān* and in comparison with God, they are seen in their limitations and mortality, greed, fallibility, and so on.

rather to tell apart particular types of people and dogs within each category. The two different types of dogs were a metaphor for asserting certain models of Muslims/citizens of which the state approved or disapproved. Mr. Akbari expressed his resentment toward this totalizing view as: “It was as though we were all newborns, as if they were to teach us everything, even that ‘the bus was larger than the minibus.’²⁰⁵ They’d forgotten that we brought them to power. But this was our own fault, for we’d forgotten that too. We elevated Khomeini from “Mister” (āgha) to Imam. We raised him so high that they made us believe it was Ok to let even our prayers go, if he ordered it; that following his orders was more important than praying to God. For these “āghāyān” we fought, killed or got killed.”

Mr. Akbari’s resentment towards the idea of being molded into a particular kind of submissive Muslim citizen is not necessarily shared by every Iranian. Even when I asked Mr. Akbari how he could have served as a “basiji,” considering his strong critical views, he responded by telling me a story from Rumi’s *Masnavi*. “As this lover in *Masnavi*, who, as long as he was in love, could see nothing but perfection in his lover, most people saw only the good things in the new regime. But like *Masnavi*’s lover, as the infatuation cooled down, people began seeing the spot in the lover’s eye.” There were positive qualities to the Revolution, suggested Mr. Akbari. “Under the Shah, we’d

²⁰⁵ This phrase, “Bus is larger than minibus” used to be written on the street walls, in the early years after the Revolution, as a mockery to imply both the trivialness of Khomeini’s lectures and an allusion to the extreme power that was granted to him so much so that even the most commonsensical issues were to have his mark on them.

lost our dignity. The Revolution gave us back our dignity. We felt powerful, like we could really have a say in this world.”²⁰⁶

On the other hand, Mr. Kabiri, who is also a war veteran and presently works as a middle-ranking government official, offers an entirely different reading of and reaction to the project of modified Muslim citizens. For Mr. Kabiri, Khomeini was “the ultimate awakened consciousness” whose guidance was essential for following the Path of God. He suggests that “submitting to Khomeini meant submitting to God. Only through this submission, which is also submission to God,” Mr. Kabiri continued, “were we able to control our animalistic and sinful instincts. As human we are always torn between human spiritual life and our animalistic desires. By submitting to a pure spirit, we save ourselves from sins. Because of our submission to Imam [Khomeini] our army [during the war with Iraq] was so different from the devilish Iraqi army. Our army was the army of Imam Hussein, of God.”

In Mr. Akbari’s view, utter submission to human authority undermines individuals’ religiosity, even endangers their essential obligations towards God. He considers such a relationship to God, and to the world, as analogous to the way trained sheep dogs lose their own sense of danger, and act according to the interests of the shepherd. For Mr. Kabiri, on the other hand, relating to God is rendered possible only through submission to a mediatory human authority. Among a myriad ramifications underlying these two different views, I concentrate on the gap between individuals as subjects and citizens, vis-à-vis a particular nation-state, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

²⁰⁶ One could trace the marker of different social positions in the way Mr. Sho’aei suggested that the Islamic Republic had driven the country backward, to “1400 years ago” and “we Iranians have lost our prestige and dignity in the world,” while Mr. Akbari feels dignified because of the Revolution.

Traversing the Abyss between Animals and Humans

Khomeini's transcending mission to make Iranians into "ādam"(humans) was by no means an attempt to turn the wheel of Iranian history backward to the Early Islamic Era, as many Iranian and Western scholars have so often misconceived it. It was rather congruent with the goal of modern nation-states to refashion their subjects/citizens, in harmony with its new norms, systems of discipline and punishment, and regimes of power and knowledge. Like other revolutions, as Marx suggests, the Iranian Revolution, too, had summoned the spirits of the dead. But it had done so not merely to invigorate or delimit revolutionary fervor. By suggesting a connection with the martyrs of Karbala, the religious leaders of the Revolution, and later the state, assumed for themselves divine righteousness. Linking the recent history of Iran to that of early Shi'ism was a means both to homogenize the revolutionary movements and the nation, and proclaim legitimacy and divinity for the state and its officials. Through appeals to collective memory, the subjects of the modern nation-state were to be produced as conscious and voluntary submitters to and believers in the legitimacy of the state and its divinity. Following Khomeini's command, people were to vote for a "true representative government of God on earth," the "Islamic Republic Regime of Iran, neither a word less, nor a word more."²⁰⁷ The regulatory impact of this homogenizing and mystifying project resulted in the severe repression and eradication of any slippage, even if momentarily, from the "True Divine Path."

²⁰⁷ This paradox of voting citizens and the absolute right of the supreme religious leader (vali-e-faghih) has recently returned to the political scenery in Iran, engendering debates about the priority of one or another. While some strong supporters of the power of "vali-e-faghih" suggest that the people's vote merely renders more legitimacy to the regime and is not a determining factor in policy making, others emphasize the Republican nature of the regime. In the center are those who suggest the inseparability of the Islamic and Republic parts of the Regime, while both appeal to Khomeini in support of their views. These debates are prevailing in all public arenas, nowadays.

However, as the stories of the subjects of this dissertation testify, this true path has by no means been, or could ever be, a fixed, straight trajectory on which submissive passengers are driven by the omnipotent state apparatus. Even within its own circle, the multiplicity of the readings of the “Imam’s Path” (Khatt-e Imam) has led some of those once entitled “Imam’s friends” (yārān-e Imam) to prison, and occasionally even to the grave.²⁰⁸ Over and over, since the inception of the Islamic Republic, this presumably straight path has turned into curved routes, detours, short cuts, even re/turns, characterized by the reality of the “actions upon actions,” each challenging and recreating the views of the other and of themselves.

Rather than mere discursive implications, the effects of these shifting boundaries have often been translated into distinctive experiences for different groups and individuals. Zohreh saw the changes of the Khatami era as “even though temporary, a priceless little breathing space for commemorating our martyrs.” In 2003, Zohreh tried to draw a picture of what it had been like before so I could “fathom what this little gasp of air really meant” to them.

Do you know what it feels like to walk into the graveyard of your dead ones, week after week, every time finding the entire place shoveled over and turned upside-down? On top of whatever we have to still deal with, never knowing how they were killed or if they were even buried, we were not even allowed to mourn them. Can you imagine coming here knowing that you are watched, all the time, that any moment you could be arrested? This was how it was for us all these years. They didn’t even have mercy for the flowers we left on the graves; they crushed them under their feet, took them away. Of course this neither stopped us from bringing flowers nor from trying to come anyway. We were arrested, beaten up. We planted; they pulled them out. We brought flowers, they destroyed them. We tried to make markers; they ruined them. We left signposts; they uprooted

²⁰⁸ The numbers of the former state officials in jail are increasing on a daily basis and are reported in newspapers and websites.

the entire place to mess up the locations of our graves; we located them by measuring by our hands. They deprived our martyrs of individual graves; we turned the entire cemetery into a collective single grave; we visited them as if they all belonged to a single family. Of course many stopped coming, many died, but we made these wicked monsters see that no matter how maliciously they tried to silence us and our martyrs, we wouldn't give up. They couldn't make us forsake our beautiful young martyrs."

سرود خواندند



(They sang hymns): Khavaran Cemetery, August 2006

In 2003, "wow how daring" was the expression of my surprise at the sight of a group of mainly elderly women who, having gathered around a mass grave covered with flowers, were singing a song about the precious treasures Khavaran held under its soil. In response to my reaction, Zohreh explained how recent these changes were and how in "the last couple of years things have been much better." She reminded me that "those few half-hidden, modest, tombstones are very recently placed. Not long ago," she suggested, "it would've been a matter of a few hours before they were smashed into pieces and taken away." Alluding to the new victory of the so-called hardliners in the

parliament, Zohreh maintained: “we know things are going to change for the worse again, but for now we feel less harassed coming here.”²⁰⁹ According to her, the less severe scrutiny and arrests had not come about without the relentless struggles of the families to push the boundaries of the state dominance further back. In her words:

These changes had not happened out of their [the state officials'] goodness. First of all, people are finally awakened; they now realize what a brutal system they have been supporting, in the name of Islam. I don't want to assume too much power for ourselves. But we fought as well, and I don't think it has gone without effects. They arrested, threatened, beat us, blindfolded us, kept us in jail, but we kept coming back. When it was too risky for youngsters, parents, especially the mothers came. Once my mom and I were arrested; they [the prison officials] kept threatening us. I did not say much, for my mother had told me not to. But you should've seen my mom. She was unbelievable.

Zohreh's eyes sparkled as she spoke of her mother's courage.

She told the interrogators: 'you want to kill me? Go ahead. You think I care? You murderers have forgotten how Zaynab put Yazid to shame after her brother [Imam Hussein] was martyred? You kill my three young boys and expect me to be silent? What kind of Muslims are you? What life do I have without my sons? You really have the guts to tell me not to mourn? Why? Do you take us to be animals? What kind of mother loses her child and does not mourn? My sons were more human (*ensān*) that your little brain can imagine. They sacrificed for people like you; they were fighting the Shah when you were still wetting yourself.

Zohreh had lost her mother only a few months ago, so she was quite emotional as she went on to say: “Mothers like my mom fought to keep the memory of our young martyrs alive. They forced the regime to loosen its strong grip on us. But now she is gone and another wave of suppression is on the way. She won't be around to speak for

²⁰⁹ In fact, in 2006, in the eighteenth anniversary of the massacre of political prisoners of the summer of 1988, the cemetery was closed to visitors, which did not stop them from entering it by using the underground canals, or even by climbing the walls. Many arrests and beatings were reported. See Iranian websites, including *Didgah.com*, *Iranians.com*, and *Gooya.com*

the humanity of our martyrs. My sister and I are the only ones left to keep my brothers' memories alive and she has a bad heart, and we both are chain smokers."

Deemed as "unfit citizens," the "non-belonging ones" (*nā khodihā*), Zohreh's brothers were among many whose elimination was an important aspect of productively constituting new subjects and subjectivities. Equally important to such a formation was the extreme luminosity projected on the ideal citizens, or in Mr. Shoaee's term, "those who belonged," the "*khodiyā*," the flawless model provided by the dead martyrs. As with the rules of conduct of any nation-state, the ones set forward by state led by Khomeini were not merely limited to punishments. Positive disciplining has been no less vital to the production and maintenance of new sets of norms than the cleansing of contaminating transgressions. This does not merely imply that, like prisons which demarcate the boundaries of legality, the eradication of opponents also lays bare the politics and provisos of proper citizenry. Nor does it mean that the great reverence devoted to official martyrs, the promised heaven, or their ever-living status, are the sole means of encouraging martyrdom. Rather, a combination of the extreme stigmatization of transgressors and the hyper-veneration of martyrs, as the very embodiment of the productive role of the dead, has been indispensable to the formation and maintenance of the newly dominant norms and structures.

Nowadays, circumscribed within these two exceptional ends, the "belongs" (*khodihā*) and the "non-belongs" (*nā khodihā*), in Mr. Sho`aee's humorous and sarcastic term, are the majority of Iranians, whom Mr. Sho`aee categorically and jokingly, dubs as "obsoletes" (*bikhodiyā*). Contrary to Mr. Sho`aee's term, these seeming "obsolete" (*bikhodihā*) citizens are at the core of the ongoing refashioning

project of the nation-state. The two exceptional models are the very means of defining and delimiting the boundaries of normality for the proper citizenry, for those in the middle. An intertwined relationship characterizes the relationship and the rationality behind the positions of the dead and the living, each alluding to, channeling, and reshaping the others, each contaminating and becoming contaminated by the others. The official and unofficial martyrs epitomize the extreme ends of this normative sociality for the citizens.

Similarly, the conception of the present as ruptured from, continuous with, and a reenactment of early Shi'i history allows the state ideologues to interject a seemingly solid, scheme into the reality of a constantly volatile society. While people and the state are constantly shaped anew, they are portrayed as the embodiments or images of the original characters and events, so that everything appears as fixed, yet changing. Likewise, the "incompetence" of the living in remaining faithful to the unwavering image of an ideal "ommat," is to be restored by the interpolation of durable concepts and images. "Resurrecting" and reifying an unattainable origin coexists with and perpetuates the essential role of the ever-present dead for the post-revolutionary state's claim to revolutionary character, and its need for stability. For the living, by the very fact of being alive, plant the banned plants, cover the forbidden places with flowers; in short, they disrupt and redefine the boundaries of the normative and the taboo.

Contrary to the inherently subversive quality of a living society, the notion of an ever-present dead presents itself to the dominant discourse as an epitome of stability and resilience. The statuses and utilizations of the dead are certainly subject to change, but they are assumed to be more selectively delimited within and under the terms and

agendas set by the state. The very notion of martyrdom simultaneously personified a seemingly eternal and static “Truth,” the interpretation and rereading of which was to be owned and safeguarded by a particular group of state elites. Khomeini’s proclamation, “we have come to make you human, “ādam,” referred to this mission: the refashioning of modern Muslim citizens into the image of perfect martyrs.

Imperfect Citizens and the Perfect “Ommat”

Ambivalent potentialities for subjugation and subjectivities breed within the aperture between the notion of an ideal “*ommat*” and imperfect individuals. This abyss and the possibilities are opened up by the inherent incongruity between a desire to remodel the citizens to fit into a fixed image of a nation-*ommat*, and the multifaceted and malleable subjectivities of citizens. Without the guidance of, and the submission to, a divine authority, the members of the *ommat* are perceived, in Deleuze and Guattari’s term, as “desiring machines.” As surmised by Mr. Kabiri, such individuals are controlled by their “*nafs-e-amāreh*” (lascivious soul), and are entrapped in their animalistic desires and lust. The living subjects and their shifting subjectivities pose inherent risks to the “unity” (*vahdat*) of the imaginary homogenous “*ommat*.” Yet, under Khomeini’s guidance, and through him, the state, the collective “*ommat*,” could turn into a miraculous force, capable not only of overthrowing the Shah but of establishing the only true Islamic nation-state on earth. The potential grounds for satanic temptations were saved and converted into the “soldiers of the Imam of the Age” (*sarbāzān-e- Imam-e- Zamān*), in their “voluntary” obedience to Khomeini and his path.

Khomeini’s perplexing characterization of the Iranian Revolution as “*enfejār-e nour*” (explosion of the light) and a “*mo`ajeh-ye elāhi*” (God’s miracle), whose

participants were to be made into humans, should be deciphered in light of the chasm between unrestrained willful individuality and a voluntarily disciplined subjectivity. This aperture offers a miraculous and transcending possibility of metamorphism from profanity to consecration. The task of the state was to guide and actualize the conversion of individuals into the disciplined “humans” (*ādams*) by creating a normative citizenry. The relentless cleansing of the “ommat” of its profane and transgressive elements, labeled as “*mo`āneds*” (those stubborn in their resistance), was central to homogenizing and reinforcing the norms and to creating new “*ādams*.”²¹⁰

As obedience to Khomeini was essential in transforming terrestrial individuals into a transcendent collective, the omnipresent figures of dead martyrs, frozen in the moment of their ultimate act of surrendering to him and his path, were crucial as normatively ideal role models for the living. In aspiring to reach this perfect model of true Muslims/citizens of an Islamic nation-state the living could consciously create themselves as new subjects, new “*ādams*.” The dead, as well, were purified and turned into martyrs, no longer through mere self-sacrificial deaths against injustice, but by surrendering their lives, and deaths, to Khomeini and the state.

Materials of the Pyramid of Power: the Pronouns

The extraordinary power that Khomeini attributed to himself was apparent in the way in which, on that first day of his arrival, he set himself apart from the entire “ommat,” including all other clergy members. Referring to the Shah’s last cabinet, in his

²¹⁰ According to Agamben, this notion of duality of human beings is suggested by Greek philosophers, from Aristotle to Plato, who separate biological humans from humans as sociopolitical beings (1998). The conditionality of humanity of humans has been a prevailing notion. While the defining factor which make humans human has varied, its reliance on a particular element or condition has not. From language, to tool making, to social and political characteristics, to spirituality, so on and so forth, humans have constantly lived on the edge between humanness and animality.

familiar clerical tone, but in the words of a lay person, he declared: “*I* hit this cabinet on the mouth” (*man* to dahan-e- in dolat mizanam); and “*I myself* choose the cabinet” (*man khodam* dolat tayyin mikonam).²¹¹ The three pronouns used by Khomeini in his speech, the “I,” the “we,” and the “you.” in “*I* hit this cabinet...., *I* myself choose....,” and “*we* have come to make *you* into ādam,” introduced the hierarchical materials of the new social structure.²¹² Within that gap between Khomeini’s “I” (*man*), the “we” (*mā*), which referred to him and the soon to become state officials, and the “plural you” (*shomā*), the people, resided the new dynamics of power in the making. These pronouns illustrated and configured the founding motifs of the state and its relationship to Khomeini, and to the nation.

It was no accident therefore that, while Khomeini’s statement about the indebtedness of the Revolution to martyrs’ blood was phrased in a passive form, the statements about his own role were active declarations: “*I* hit this cabinet on the mouth,” and “*I myself* select the cabinet.” In the former passive assertion about the indebtedness of the Revolution to martyrs’ blood, the Revolution embodied the people, who, in a mystifyingly nonfigurative way, were reckoned as infinite beneficiaries of the Revolution and debtors to martyrs’ blood. To this ambivalently conclusive, collective, perpetual debt, all Iranians were perceived to be heirs. Contrary to this interminable burden, Khomeini’s political task was concrete and timely. He was the “I” (*man*) who would single-handedly finish up the old regime and form the new cabinet [the new state]. But the task of refashioning the nation was a collective and continuous project, the rules of

²¹¹ Later he would eliminate Abu-al Hasan Bani Sadr, the first president and change and choose cabinet members.

²¹² Italics are mine.

which were phrased in Khomeini's statement, in plural form and in the perfect present tense as: "*We* have come to make *you* into humans" (*mā āmadeyim shomāra ādam konim*). Hence, in Khomeini's speech on the graves of martyrs, the eternal debt, and thereby the relationship of the dead and the living, the divine and earthly leadership, were intermingled. The fusion of this mystifying gift-debt, which haunted the nation, and the concrete pragmatism of the construction of the new regime characterized Khomeini's speech, on that day of his return.

The combination of Khomeini's colloquial use of language full of violent imagery (hitting the cabinet on the mouth) with his well-known clerical dialect served to merge earthly matters with other worldliness. Time and again, he would utilize expressions of violence in the colloquial language and give them a mystical twist to reach out to a larger audience. He would "pull the tongues of the dissident writers out of their throats," "break their pens," and so on..., in the service of God. His dexterity in using the literary language of the clergy²¹³ fused with the colloquial was a strategic means of establishing the power structure, by setting himself apart from the populace, while continuing to relate to it as a populist.

God, as Khomeini repeatedly stated, was the cause of the defeat of the Shah's Regime that was supported by the "entire satanic world." As a representative of God on earth, Khomeini was able to utter the first and the last word on the matters of the divine and the earthly. Yet, people's trust in Khomeini's submission to God was imperative to sustain his authoritative positions. The absence of mythical origins was "furnished

²¹³ The particular dialect, in which most Iranian religious clerics including Khomeini speak, has been the source of nourishment of prevailing jokes, especially for the secular middle-class elite. The recent film Marmoulak, "*Lizard*" (2004) by Kamal Tabrizi played with this dialect and greatly benefited from people's even more increasing fascination with ridiculing the clerics.

precisely by their manipulation of and with “proper” names (de Certeau, 1984: 103), in linking Khomeini’s first name, “Ruh-ullah” (the Spirit of God), the title of his ranking, “ayat-ullah” (the sign of God) and his position, the “vali-e-faghih” (the supreme religious leader). The manipulation of names and signifiers, combined with the story of his fighting the Shah and his sufferings or “*mazlumiyyat*” in exile, and in the loss of his son, all merged to lead him to replace the original authority of Imam Hussein. Through his ascendance to the status of the holy Imam, the state was also claimed as being “the only true representative of Islam on Earth.” Under the omnipresent shadow of this “*man*” (I) the state obtained its divine authority to launch its human ādam-making project.²¹⁴

Crowning Khomeini with this title, which was an allusion to the Shi`i Imams, was by no means a mere bestowal of honor, though so it might have initially appeared to the majority of Iranians. This divine authority rather allowed for the monopoly of violence of a modern state to be translated into Khomeini’s “fatwas” (religious verdict offered by qualified clergy) as God’s will. Through these “fatwas,” participation in the Iran-Iraq War and the eradication of the state’s opponents were deemed to be Muslims-citizens’ obligatory religious duty.²¹⁵ Thus, the transmission of authority from God to Khomeini, and from him to the state by way of his endowment with the title of Imam, went nearly unquestioned by the religious clerics, regardless of its religiously unorthodox and even somewhat blasphemous connotation.

²¹⁴ It is noteworthy that later the very phrase “*prozhe-ye ādam sāzi*” (the human making project) was used by prison officials to characterize their punitive measures against dissidents.

²¹⁵ In 1988, after accepting United Nation’s 598 Convention which was followed by Mojahedin’s attack on the western borders of Iran, in a fatwa, Khomeini ordered the annihilation (*nābood kardan*) of all the political prisoners who were still opposing the regime.

With Khomeini's ascendance to the status of the holy, the state and its officials under his supervision could also claim infallible and unwavering authority. For, as Mary Douglas and several other anthropologists remind us, to be sacrosanct is to be as contagious as pollution. Claims to divinity could present the Islamic Republic with a way out of the dilemma of justifying and resuming political suppression immediately after its inception.²¹⁶ With the state turning sacred, any political transgression would no longer be perceived as a mere gesture of dissidence but a sinful act of breaking religious taboos. However, for elevation to the status of divinity, various associations had to be ascertained and revived.

Discursive Reading of Apertures

The relationship between the notions of infallibility and guardianship was ridden with tension long before the Islamic Republic. While the Qu`ran attributes infallibility only to God,²¹⁷ a contradiction emerges when the words and acts of the Prophet and the Imams are perceived as reflections of their absolute submission to God. Several Qu`ranic verses advise the Prophet to utter submission. In relation to the Revelation, the Prophet is instructed: "You need not move your tongue too fast to learn this revelation. We Ourselves shall see to its collection and recital....we shall ourselves explain its meaning." And..."your duty is only to warn [the unbelievers]" (Qu`ran: 31), for "Allah is the guardian of all things" (134). The Qu`ran further emphasizes: "Leave to Me those that deny this revelation" (63).

²¹⁶ Marx speaks of this dilemma, as the typical shyness, of all post-revolutionary regimes having emerged on the shoulders of the very people they are to suppress.

²¹⁷ Qu`ran criticizes any blurring of the distinction between God and human in, for instance, viewing God as the Father, the Son, or as embodied in a human body.

While the role of the Prophet as a mere messenger might be deduced from the above verses, his prophetic authority and infallibility originates from his unwavering obedience to God. His utter submission, once translated into acts and words that are generated by God's will, could easily be perceived as infallible and generative of his prophetic authority. Such flawlessness and authority appear, as it were, somewhat of a secondary quality, inseparable but radically different from those of the Original source, of God. These attributes seem to be obtained because of the Prophet's immaculate submission to and rendition of God's will, rather than being innately possessed by him.²¹⁸ In elucidating this paradoxical relation between submission and authority, many discursive interventions might be invoked, from the relation of the original object and its copy to that of the oral and the written, of authorship and readership, and the question of authority of the voice and body in regard to spirit possession and mediumship.

Questions of text and textuality haunt the very existence of the Qu`ran and Mohammad's role as its disseminator. Although it is said that the Revelation was presented to Mohammad through the voice of the Angel Jibrail, it still posited him in a different status than ordinary people, simply because of his bestowal with God's Message. Even with the collection, recital, and explanation of the meaning of Revelation presumed as God's task, as a text the Qu`ran inevitably invites a multiplicity of interpretations and interpreters. In its transformation from the oral to the text emerge, first of all, the dilemma to which Brinkley Messick refers as the "central problem in Muslim thought." This central problem, according to Messick, hinges upon "the difficult

²¹⁸ One might compare this "perfection" to the challenge that Qu`ran puts forwards to the poets of the era to present verses comparable to those of Qur`an. The greatest of these earthly poems, so suggests Qu`ran, could at their best be mere imitations of Qu`ran. In their failing to reach the divine beauty and perfection of God's Words, these poems highlight and prove the incomparable sublimity and Originality of God's Words.

transition from the unity and authenticity of the Text of God to the multiplicity and inherently disputed quality of the texts of men” (Messick, 1996: 17). I would argue that the “concurrently underlying tension...in *shari`a* scholarship” and the “unresolvable gulf opened between divinely constituted truth and humanly constituted versions of that truth,” have deeper roots in the subtle and somewhat hidden ambivalence pivoting around the figure of the Prophet.

As the primary receiver and disseminator of God’s Word, the Prophet is himself a text, and an authoritative figure, whose reading of Qu`ran, the Text of God, stands above and beside that of other readers (Messick, 1996: 17). While the Qu`ran still somewhat directly presents itself to the reader,²¹⁹ the Prophet is no longer present, except through the stories told about him in *hadiths*. This conflict between authoritative readings of the Qu`ran and its alternative, “transgressive,” interpretations, which are nearly as old as Islam,²²⁰ have roots, in Chartier’s words, in the way that “creators (or the ‘powers’ or the ‘clerics’) always aspire to pin down their meaning and proclaim the correct interpretation,...that ought to constrain reading (or viewing).” Yet as both the history of Islam and the recent Iranian history demonstrate, “without fail reception invents, shifts about, distorts” (Chartier, 1994: x).

Islamic ideologues too, as nomadic readers of other authoritative readings, insert their readings in the gap left open in this contradiction; they invade these fissures, twist and stretch them towards their own paths and links. Yet, in positions of authority, they in

²¹⁹ Of course no direct and independent reading of texts ever exists, most particularly of the Text of God. One always reads within and is informed by the dominant discourses which curtail possibilities and diversions.

²²⁰ The never ending conflicts even among the clergy members in recent Iran are translated in the establishment of a “Clergy Court” (*Dādghāh-e-Rohāniyyat*), which particularly tries those religious clerics whose reading of Islam, the regime claims, has strayed away from that of the current authority.

turn territorialize and safeguard their readings and impose them on Iranian society.

Within these inconsistencies and apertures people walk, leap, and make their own marginal detours. This is how Zohreh's mother, in her effort to put her interrogators to shame, confronts them on the shared ground of the Karbala Narrative about Zaynab.

Chartier's notion that the author remains present in the text,²²¹ as do the form and the voice through which the text is communicated, poses a profound dilemma when the text in hand is the Text of God. With the Words of God spoken to, and transferred through the Prophet's body, the question of authorship and readership becomes extremely complicated, at once limiting and opening up possibilities of alternative readings. By shifting and distorting the dominant readings of his time, and precisely by inserting his reading into this gap, Khomeini transpired as God's representative, as another medium through whose body and voice God, once again, spoke.

As with the text that enters, travels through, and possesses the numerous bodies of its readers, the medium is by no means a mere transmitter through which the message passes unaltered. The illusive perception of mediums and texts as mere vehicles or as passive transmitters has been prevailingly refuted in recent anthropological literature. Both with the text and the medium, the message and the messenger are produced within their particular context; both are transformed by and transform one another, and their context.

Through Mohammad's body and voice the message of God was transmitted to humans. The Prophet was a reader of God's Text, and the very body on which the Text was written. Through his body, the incommunicative Divinity was materialized in human

²²¹ This view invokes and somewhat contradicts Barthes (1977) and Foucault's views (1987) about the death of the author in the text.

language in the form of a Text. His relationship to the Text thus vacillated between that of a semi-author, translator, and reader, while all along he himself was a, and the, text. In the passing of the Divine Message through the body, the body, the “medium,” was transcended and acquired divinity. Emanating from a human body, and written in “a living, socio-ideological concrete thing,”²²² human language, God’s Revelation subjected itself to a multiplicity of readings, to human flaws and transgressions (Bakhtin, 2000: 293). For, contrary to Plato’s claim that writing and painting are analogous and both “seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything...they say the same thing for ever,” neither writing, nor painting, ever say the same thing twice, not even to the same person (1982:156). While writing, as de Certeau suggests, accumulates, stocks up, resists time by the establishment of a place....[r]eading takes no measures against the erosion of time, it does not keep what it acquires, or it does so poorly” for as travelers, readers “move across lands belonging to someone else” (1984: 174). In moving across someone else’s land, the Islamic ideologues made it their own. In spite of their imposed constraints, readings were multiplied by people, like the surfaces of the Iranian cemeteries.

All this said, at the very core of the analogies presented here, dwells a substantial error which ignores the dualism that, since the Enlightenment, has divided the celestial and terrestrial worlds. Any discursive reading of this relationship would always already be impregnated with the danger of blurring the boundaries of the sacred and the profane.

²²² In this very subjection to human language, it endangers its absolute Truthfulness. As Bakhtin reminds us, in relation to human language, “there are no neutral words and forms—words and forms that can belong to ‘no one’; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents...As a...heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other (2000: 293).

In these realms, one is always already dealing with the element of contagion and contamination. Hence, far graver concerns emerge here than the loss of aesthetic aura in the absence of the original, as Benjamin discusses in his “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Benjamin, 1968: 217).

The Paradoxical Submission and Authority

Endemic to most authoritative claims, and particularly the equation of submission and its emanating authority, is public trust, which is curiously often undermined yet consistently manipulated by authorities. On public trust depends not only the entire fate of Islam and, in fact, all faiths, but also the legitimacy of all sociopolitical authorities. Only after belief in Mohammad’s vestment by Revelation was established could the idea of his prophetic authority find a ground for negotiation. Neither Mohammad’s prophecy, nor its dissemination and growth could come about without a fertile socioeconomic, cultural, religious and political ground for its belief.²²³ Likewise, Khomeini’s ascendance to semi-divine status, and through him that of the Islamic Republic, originated from and within a particular backdrop of modernity. The utilization of advanced technologies of the age of mechanical production enabled the refurbishing and cunning manipulation of the original stories, and the creation of an “apparent origin.”²²⁴

Through the great work of “magic” performed by these modern technologies, the gigantic leap between the original authority of God and the Prophet was transferred to the

²²³ Marx Weber argues that the “Spirit of Capitalism” can be separated from the “capitalist enterprise.” He suggests that Benjamin Franklin “was filled with the ‘capitalist spirit’ at a period when, in terms of its *form*, his printing business in no way differed from any craft business.” (Weber, 2002: 20). This spirit, nevertheless, in Weber’s term, is a historical individual, and emerged therefore within a particular historical context.

²²⁴ Without the prevailing feeling of loss of God and the connection to the original Islam under the Shah, the claim to necessity of a guardian and Khomeini’s entitlement as Imam would or could not have emerged, nor would millions of veterans including Mr. Kabiri’s utter submission to Khomeini be justifiable to them.

Islamic Republic of Iran. On the television screen, people were multiplied; their homes were stretched out all the way to the streets of Paris. As the distance in time and space was dismantled, as the days and nights of Iran, Paris, and the US, merged together on TV screens, the spatial, temporal boundaries of the past, present, and future, of different places also collapsed. People carried the bodies of their young martyrs as they shouted: “This is our Ali Akbar, a gift to our leader” (in Ali Akbar-e- māst, hedyeh beh rahbar-e- māst). Once killed in the seventh century for Imam Hussein in the desert of Karbala, Ali Akbar was martyred time and again, in cities, towns, and villages, and later even in the here-and-now of national television. In commemorating these Ali Akbars, the two *shabih khānis*, that of Karbala and of the Revolution, reenacted one another, though no longer clear which event was the reenactment of the other. Along with the Revolution, the Karbala Event and Shi`i history were reinvented. Karbala came to resemble the Revolution perhaps even more than the Revolution resembled the Karbala Event.

Historically, there have always been some religious clerics, more predominantly before the Revolution, who have assumed their roles to be mere interpreters of Islamic teachings. Khomeini and the Islamic Republic state, nevertheless, undertook the provocative step of placing themselves as the representative of God on earth, and claimed authority in overseeing not only the lives but the afterlife of the Iranians.²²⁵ The modern Islamic Republic state went a step further than most other modern states in representing, if not embodying, God in both terrains. It took upon itself the responsibilities of both the divine and the earthly domains.

²²⁵ The division of labor between the earthly and divine authorities is not unique to the Islamic Republic. In fact modern-nation-states have assumed for themselves the managing of earthly matters of their citizens, leaving for God the affairs of the afterlife.

This spilling out and over of the original to the representational in the terrains of sacred and profane has been of great service to the Islamic Republic, though also a grave source of peril to its claim to divinity. The gate to the world of the divine has been fortified and safeguarded by the state as its own territory, while its domain has been expanded across time, space, and objects. Writing about a painting exhibition by and about martyrs of the Iran-Iraq War, Mohammad Ali Rajabi (2001) offers an exemplary utilization of this notion of spilling out and over the sacred. He suggests that the holiness of the martyrs deifies not only martyrs' own paintings, but the painters who paint martyrs and their paintings, as well as the entire space of the exhibition hall. In Rajabi's view, this purity not only encompasses those people and objects physically touched by martyrs, or which are reflections of them in the here and now, but also connects these martyrs, objects and spaces all the way back to the early martyrs, and to Imam Hussein.

The flipside of this argument connects all profanity with the contaminating power floating and subjecting anything and anyone on its way, in all times and spaces. This spatial and temporal convergence has by no means been a mere discursive or metaphorical gesture. Ayat-ulla Gilani's Court was only one of the many places in which these views were put into practice. A notorious judge of the Islamic Republic, Gilani, has tried and sentenced thousands of young dissidents. Once, while trying several teenagers, a trial which was repeatedly broadcasted, he explained his rationale behind sentencing "these kids" to death. "These innocent looking fourteen and fifteen year old kids have assaulted Imam Hussein and the members of his troop." In a semi-platonic dialogue, during which he asked the questions to which he himself answered, he explained how "the seemingly impossible act of physically assaulting Imam Hussein had actually

occurred, despite the Imam's physical absence." According to Gilani, "by spraying pepper in the eyes of the Revolutionary Guards, these criminals have in fact sprayed pepper in the eyes of Imam Hussein's troops, thereby in Imam Hussein's eyes." Their crime, Gilani said "is despicable and these monsters deserve thousands of deaths, for the Revolutionary Guards are the embodiment of the companions of Imam Hussein, and "Imam Hussein is embodied in Imam Khomeini."²²⁶

The lavishly green "Flower Gardens of Martyrs," insinuating gardens of heaven, and the non-existing or ruinous cemeteries of the dissident "unbelievers" unmarked but referred to, by the state, as "Lanat Ābād" (the Land of the Damned) are facades that actualize these views. For the seemingly boundless construction is in fact confined within, and travels through, the itineraries mapped out by the Iranian modern nation-state, in the here and now of its agendas.

The Origin in Excess

The Prophet is entrusted by God's *Amānat* (Trust) because of his utter submission. The Muslims become Muslims in their surrendering to Mohammad's authority, through which they see themselves in relation to God. In the absence of the origin and the authority of the substitute, Khomeini takes over as yet another substitute, like a photograph that comes to invoke, and to a certain extent even substitute for, the real. This sense of substitution has overpopulated the walls of many dissident martyrs' families homes with the photos of the dead, as though to compensate for their absence

²²⁶The idea of Khomeini's excessive power populated people's jokes; the common theme of most of these jokes was his ambition to sneak into the position of Imams, even of God. In one of these jokes, a meeting is called by God to meet the Shi'i Imams, which Khomeini, though uninvited, attends. He first stands in line behind others, but by each Imam leaving his position to use the men's room, he moves to his place. Finally, he ends up behind Ali, the first Imam. Imam Ali complains to God about his intrusion. Restlessly God responds to Imam Ali: "What are you talking about? I can't protect your position while I haven't dared to leave my place, for I know if I do so, he would jump into my place."

and the lack of their traces. Analogous to the way a person or a place might be recognized in photos, or one's experience of the real object might be overshadowed by the images held in mind from photos, submission to Khomeini came to overshadow that of God. He and the state claimed that neither the Prophet, nor the Shi'i Imams, ever had the chance to truly implement their authority as "the only true representative government of God on Earth."

The very insistence on Khomeini's path "Khatt-e-Imam" as the only true submission to God is anchored on the claim of connections between the "mediums" through whom God's Trust and thereby his infallibility and authority are purportedly transferred to him, thus to the state. The Shi'i view that argued for lay Muslims' need for permanent guardians in following Islamic teachings was stretched to combine the divine and the earthly domains as the territory of the bio-power of the state.²²⁷ Expanding the scope of guardianship from that of God to Khomeini, the "vali-e-faghi" was a bewilderingly immense leap, over which the Islamic Republic jumped in the context of modernity, where the ghosts of the past always return with a vengeance. Khomeini's historical return, during and on the shoulders of the Revolution, in the age of mechanical reproduction, rendered this ambivalent substitution a revolutionary though a tension-ridden, possibility. To sustain this peculiar position, it has been imperative to prevent individualized reading which, in Chartier's words, is "scattered in an infinity of singular acts" (1994: 2).²²⁸ In the intrinsic conflict engendered by the Islamic Republic's narrative

²²⁷ In Ataolla Mohajerani's fiction (2005), *Gray Paradise*, the state attempts to create paradise and Hell on Earth.

²²⁸ For before Khomeini invented the new notion of a supreme Vali- Faghih, there were often several "mojtaheds" among whom Muslims could choose. Although one of them often came to be more powerful than others, but there was always possible to switch from one mojtedhed to another. For more detailed and

that “exists only because there is a reader to give it meaning,” vis-à-vis its relentless attempts to control and delimit the very possibility of other readings, reverberate the ongoing tensions and potentials in post-revolutionary Iran.

The non-“presence of the original” is, according to Benjamin, the “prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” and the source of aura has been compensated for by the invention of the Origin (Benjamin, 1968: 220). Through mechanical reproductions of narratives of origin and their mass representations, and an attendant multiplication of spectators/believers, claims to the origin were made, found public ground, and exceeded the “original.”²²⁹ Like a camera that “with the aid of certain processes...can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself,” the eyes of these leaders also moved across times and spaces and directed their audience to here and now of the faraway past or hidden places (Benjamin, 1968: 220). In pursuit of suitable names, objects, and maps, in constructing an Origin from unrelated pieces their camera searched and brought earth and sky together.

The original narrative was fabricated and rewritten by the very breaking through and away from it.²³⁰ Its loss of quality, resulting from the passing of time, or repetitive copying, or the elongated sequences of family genealogy, was invigorated, as in photography, by digitalized scanning of the old versions, by deploying revolutionary techniques and modern technologies of knowledge and power. The warring stories of

eloquent reading of the transition to this era and the role of the clergy see Abrahamian, Amir Arjomand, Dabahi, and Mottahadeh.

²²⁹ As tourists’ visits of new places often involve seeking images held in memory, nowadays the war veterans as well no longer fight wars as their own first hand experiences, for their experiences are colored and overshadowed by the images of the wars they see before they go to the front.

²³⁰ An example of this rupture is manifest in the notion of “masumiyyat” (infallibility) which according to the Shi‘i ideologues was suspended by the occultation of the Twelfth Imam.

origin were “rescued” by pumping new blood, both metaphorically and physically, into their veins. This origin was mended and narrated in the image of the Revolution that was to found a new nation-state and refashion its population into a specific kind of Muslim citizens, into “ādams.” To establish this original “ommat,” the ancient graves of history were dug up; the infinite future became present. The recent myths of scientific inquiries married the antique sciences of myth. Massively produced and disseminated, these narratives of origin fused the familial and mythical genealogies of blood and historical connections.²³¹ The metaphorical honorary title of Imam, which first appeared in a song upon Khomeini’s landing at the airport, was repeatedly broadcast by the audio-visual media and turned into a national anthem. It was immediately and systematically appropriated by the dominant discourse, not as a mere metaphorical political honorary title, but as a literal religious endowment.²³²

Through “reading similar” (*shabih khāni*) Khomeini returned as a new Messenger of God. Yet, instead of descending on foot from a cave on the mountain, as had Mohammad upon receiving the Revelation, Khomeini descended from Paris in the roar of a landing plane. Not to the solitude of his home and wife, wherein the Prophet had returned with his Message, but to graveyards and millions of people did Khomeini reveal his message. Not through organic mouths, but rather through the mechanical mouths of microphones, radios, and televisions, was his message disseminated. Like the title that raised him from the earthly “Āgha” (Mister-master) to the deified Imam, when he

²³¹ As in film production, from enlargement to slow motion, scanning,...to most complex special effects, all techniques and technologies of power and knowledge of the modern era were utilized for the state in claiming the status of the divine.

²³² Interestingly, despite the fact that the song was made by a member of Mojahedin Organization and performed by many of their fans, who later were considered the worst enemy of Khomeini and the State, its application for the regime proved so essential and powerful that the state made it the national anthem.

appeared at Behshtzahra he arrived from the sky, in a helicopter, as divine.²³³ To form a state that was to lead people in life and toward the afterlife in an ideal mode of utter submission, embodied in martyrs, he returned to the graves of martyrs.



The day of Khomeini's return. He went straight to honor the martyrs at Behesht-e-Zahra cemetery. In the midst of and due to the euphoric excitement of the crowd, the helicopter hovered above people's heads for quite some time before it could land.

Of the Contractions of Submission and Authority

Khomeini resided at the apex of this hierarchical system and spoke divine words in the language of the lay person. A hegemonic populism characterized Khomeini's exceptional position of power as divine, which was contradicted and complemented when he referred to himself as a "bandeh" (slave) of God, and a "khedmatgozār-e-mardom" (the servant of the people).²³⁴ The commonly ambiguous characteristic of all modern

²³³ On the day of his arrival, the enthusiasm of the crowd, who densely populated the streets attempting to reach closer to Khomeini, rendered his trip by a van from the airport to Behshtzahra impossible. The organizers had to finally steal him from the streets, and fly him in on a helicopter.

²³⁴ In a rumor which was massively disseminated over night, thanks to modern technology, he was seen on the moon. So having already ascended to the moon, he was then treated as though the sun, around and in

nation-states, which simultaneously stands above and below the nation, was augmented in regard to the Islamic Republic due to its contradictory sources of legitimacy.

As a republic, the legitimacy of the state derived from the people's vote and trust. Yet, as a representative of God on earth, authority was entrusted in the state through Khomeini, like an "amānat" (sacred trust) from God. In Khomeini's persona a saint and a mystic figure were merged, indifferent to earthly affairs.²³⁵ As a pragmatic politician he would "hit the cabinets on the mouth, choose new ones" and order and sign state opponents' execution sentences. In fusing the otherworldly and the pragmatics of political realities, external and internal wars were portrayed as wars for God, while they were fought and ended on the earthly rationalities of modern nation-states.

The pragmatics of protecting and maintaining the nation-state, which overshadowed and manipulated his divine status, were manifest in certain steps he undertook before his death to safeguard the continuation of state power and the survival of his path. Ending the external war, the massive eradication of state opponents, and the strategic mechanisms of institutionalizing the authority of the religious clergy, were all interrelated attempts to guarantee the future of the Islamic Republic. First, both his agreement to end the War and his uncharacteristic phrase "I drank the poisonous glass" in signing the 598 convention were unexpectedly shocking as well as being a harbinger of his death and the anticipated consequence for the state.²³⁶ The statement was also a

close proximity to him the entire "ommat" rotated, in different radius and varying degrees of never reaching proximity.

²³⁵ This apparent indifference was manifest in his response to a reporter's question about his feelings regarding his return after fifteen years of exile. He answered to this question in one word: "nothing."

²³⁶ Khomeini's agreement to the "undesirable" ceasefire was to ensure that the state was not to carry the burden of fighting external enemies in the period of its readjustment to his absence.

response to the expected disillusionment of the people, most particularly those who had lost their loved ones--in vain?—during this eight year war.

That people would “wonder why, and why now, after all these years of bloodshed,” while the conditions offered were no different from those of six years earlier, was true for many surviving veterans and their families. Mr. `Anbari, a former war veteran, was one of these people for whom the end was more shocking than its beginning. “I was only fourteen years old when I first went to the front. My gun was taller than me then,” he told me in 2003. In 2003, Mr. `Anbari had outgrown his gun, but not his disillusionment about the ending of the war. “If this wasn’t about Islam and Karbala, as all our leaders kept telling us, if it was just a war like any other, why didn’t they end it when we took Khorramshahr back, six years earlier?”

In response to this reality, Khomeini’s expression of drinking poison in agreeing to end the war was to invoke sympathy. His usually unapologetic and aloof expressions were noticeably diverted in this curiously emotional enunciation. Anticipating public resentment, his “drinking poison” was to resonate with the people and urge their recognition of his exceptional predicament in agreeing to end the war. It was to portray his decision as an act of self-sacrifice that had put the preservation of the nation-state above his personal inclinations. His rhetoric created divergent trajectories. Stories were told of his death having been expedited, if not directly caused, by the poisonous choice he had been forced to make. In the published letters of war veterans, he died an untimely self-sacrificing death, like a martyr, from the bleeding of the heart” (khoon-e-del), “of grief” (az ghosseh), because of this undesirable decision. His self-sacrifice was even greater than that of martyrs, so these letters suggested, for, while the “veteran martyrs had

joyously and voluntarily embraced their martyrdom under his command” (Fahimi, 2005), he had to go against his own heart. His cancer was argued to have been hastened, if not induced, by the burden of responsibility and grief.²³⁷ In less visible narratives, like those of many dissident martyrs’ mothers, including Mrs. Torani, his infliction with cancer was God’s punishment and the cumulative result of mothers’ sighs and prayers (āh-o-do`ā-ye-mādarān).

With the end of war, and with the receding rhetoric of Karbala, another story of origin was to be evoked which could better resonate with people in the new ambiance. This was the story of Imam Hassan and his self-sacrificing rational act in agreeing to a peace treaty with the Caliph of his era. In an excess of origin, both stories were fused. Out of this disillusionment, Khomeini emerged, in the dominant narratives, as the self-sacrificing Imam Hassan, though he was not martyred in a direct physical battle. Like Imam Hassan, Khomeini also was to die from drinking his (metaphorical) poison. The peace was to be seen as an undesirable but rational decision, necessary for the preservation of the nation-state.²³⁸ Yet behind Khomeini’s statement, which intended to fortify the status of the state, dwelled a deeper concern.

The idea of a forced decision to drink poison was an allusion to the narratives of the origin according to which nearly all the Shi`i Imams were assumed to have been poisoned by their enemies disguised as friends, or even as wives of the Imams. This invocation once again set Khomeini apart from the rest of the state officials, as an innocent, infallible “masum,” whose path was to survive his death. As with the Prophet

²³⁷ Another story was yet told by the state doctors, of how exceptional his cancer was, for at his late age the cells do not grow that fast. That his cancer had was yet one more proof of his unique supernatural qualities.

²³⁸ The promotion of the nationalistic language testifies to this shift. The Holy War became the Holy Defense.

and the Imams, Khomeini was to remain outside and beyond ordinary affairs. The statement also hinted at the unstable position of his successor and the need of the state to follow along his path. To prevent the state from an ultimate collapse in the future, in the case of public disillusionment, the blame was to be directed at officials who had allegedly transgressed and strayed away from his path. Khomeini was to remain as the Origin to which successors could always lay claim, and whose narrative could be recreated again and again, as were other stories of origin. His outlandishly unusual statement about ending the war might be deciphered in this light.

His second step before his death, the massacre of his opponents, also involved his “fatwa” and signature. Unlike ending the war, although no less significant, the entire process of this action was kept secret. However, the massacre left its mark, not merely on the families of those killed, nor just the bizarre landscapes of cemeteries with their new sections of mass graves identified merely as “the plot of 67” (ghateh-ye-shasto haftihā). These sections are so barren that families simply refer to them as the plot of the massacre in the year 1988.²³⁹ Its impact goes further, even beyond spoiling the long relationship between Khomeini and his own selected substitute supreme religious leader of the time, Ayat-ullah-Montazeri, whom he had called the “fruit of my life.” Its traces have appeared in occasional revelations of the secrets of this massacre, in their apparitions haunting the present state, uncannily transpiring here and there, shocking officials and demanding their response. The recent developments of letters sent by the families of these martyrs to the state officials and to human rights organizations such as Amnesty International are just the tip of the iceberg, and in fact the least shocking of all.

²³⁹ In their lack of proper name, in de Certeau’s term, they are mapped negatively, still by names. Or perhaps, in their lack of proper name, instead of creating a void, they in fact create existence, legends, rather than travel stories.

That Akbar Ganji, a former state official and war veteran who is now an outspoken journalist, dedicated the award he received in Russia to “the sacrifices of all those massacred in 1988,” is an indication of the haunting force of this “secretive” event.

Khomeini’s third project dealt with the configuration of the state structure. Expelling Ayat-ullah Montazeri, who disagreed with Khomeini’s decision to summarily eliminate his opponents, was a step toward this goal. However, while Khomeini dominated television broadcasts in his last few days before death, lying in the hospital bed, praying, eating, playing with his grandson, talking to his son and other high ranking clerics, he refused, at least in public, to appoint his successor. This provocatively curious void reproduced the dilemma and the tension of original succession in an uncannily similar fashion. If the Shi’i narratives claimed that the Prophet had in fact chosen Imam Ali as his successor, here as well some suggested that Khomeini had mentioned Ali Khameneyee in the last few days of his life. No explanation was offered as to why he was not publicly named, so as to leave no doubt. This void has since perpetuated tension, though the institutionalization of the election of the “vali-e-faghih” by a group of clerics has kept it within control. With these last practical missions accomplished, Khomeini was followed by a huge crowd, now to his grave.

From Angel of Death to the Mystical Poet

Once again, merely a decade after his arrival, millions of people would again follow Khomeini to Beheshzahra, this time to his final destination, the graveyard. A bizarre similitude characterizes the events of his arrival and those of his ultimate departure. As in the couple of days preceding his return to Iran, which had been marked by anticipation, worries, and active preparation, those few days before his death, at least

as demonstrated by the authorities, were pregnant with emotional anxiety and endeavors. In both events, the complexities and multiplicities of feeling and re/action were undermined, even rendered invisible, not merely by the authorities' manipulative representation and re/channeling of the masses but also by the monopolizing power of the masses as a collective force. As at his arrival, in departure Khomeini's persona was transformed in dialectical interaction between the collective and the authorities, both of which were products of, and produced in, a performative theatricality incorporating many factors.

The excitement and collective fervor generated an imaginary sense of monotonous harmony between authority and the masses, precisely at the cost of diminishing the remarkable incongruities and diversities characteristic of such mass movements. It would not, hence, be far-fetched to venture that the very reproduction of this peculiar authority was as much the result of the power and actions of the collective as the particular collective was the outcome of the manipulation and utilization by hegemonic forces. More utterly inconceivable would be to imagine the emergence of the conditions of possibility of these transformations and reproductions outside the age of advanced media and modern discourses.

From the remotest villages to the capital city, Tehran, the entire country watched Khomeini's last few days in the hospital. Everyone became the witness/spectator of the here-and-now of his dying, as they watched him praying, sleeping, holding his grandson, reading,... No longer with his usual frowning face, but rather in pale illness. He was depicted in an innocent calm, as though surrounded by a halo of light, a hallowed light. On television, people watched themselves, again and again, praying, crying, and lighting

candles for him; they saw themselves in mosques, on the streets, minute after minute on television, which multiplied their numbers and the frequency of their appearance and actions. Imitating themselves, they showed up in even larger numbers, with more prayers, cries, and candles. In the meantime, Khomeini in hospital, in a plain white cloth and without his turban, touched by death, appeared more like an angel than the omnipotent “Vali-e-Faghih,” or a head of state.

“That angel” who, in the revolutionary chants, was to arrive with the departure of the Monstrous Shah, “had come all right” in 1979 but, for some like Mrs. Rashidi, the mother of three executed leftists, “if not as a monster, then as an angel of death.” He had come with his fist ready to hit on the mouth whoever dared question his authority. While sitting on the unmarked mass graves in which she assumed two of her three executed sons to be buried, Mrs. Rashidi spoke of Khomeini as someone who “thrived on others’ death, invested in cemeteries, and turned the entire country into a gigantic graveyard.” According to Mrs. Gha`emi, a mother, whose two sons and daughter-in-law were also executed, and whose daughter almost died in jail, “Khomeini’s perfect timing” had allowed for a shockingly massive funeral “despite all his monstrosities.”

“Wisdom in the Eyes”

The long night was nearly about to end, when Mrs. Gha`emi got on her feet, and performed her ablutions for morning prayers. She and I had talked the entire night about her life, focusing mainly on her children and the hardship of raising them as a young widow. I had imagined the life of a beautiful young widow, as she had told me how hard she had worked to make sure her children received the best education and grew up with “proper moral and social values.” I had traced joy and pride in her eyes, as she had told me “how wonderful” they had tuned out, and how she felt that “every mother would’ve

been proud to have children like them, so brilliant, so kind and selfless, so beautiful, with such wonderful social manners.” Her stories of their arrests and execution had kept me on the edge of my seat the entire night.

And now it was already dawn; the first morning light was seeping through the windows in Mrs. Gha`emi’s cozy two-bedroom apartment when, as she was about to put on her chador to pray, she suddenly began talking about Khomeini and his death. “He could fool people in this world, but is he going to fool God?” After an entire sleepless night, with her white plain “maghnaeh” covering her hair, her already pale face looked even lighter. Now, with her calm face and light green eyes, she appeared more angelic than a hard working widow. The album of her children was still open to the page on which her arms were around two of her now executed sons, their laughter frozen. When she raised her hands to say her “Niyyat” [intent to pray], I returned to the photos. But all of sudden, she dropped her hands, and began taking: “Had he died a little later, he would’ve faced his infamy. He would’ve seen what a monster people saw in his fake sainthood. Alas (*heif*)! He died too early. They all die too early.” I knew that by “they” she had in mind Lajevardi, and Halvayee, the two notorious prison officials. Putting her chador on, she seemed to resume her praying, but then, as if unsatisfied by her explanation, or perhaps too preoccupied to pray, she went on to say:

We Iranians are so emotionally unstable and unpredictable. What we say or feel today can be 180 degrees different the day after. We are so easily played upon and fooled by appearances and words. Just a few days before they announced his illness, you could hear, not just from the families of [political] prisoners or those executed, but most other people, complaints and curses against him. Everywhere you went, people told jokes about him. I can’t tell you how many times I

heard people talking about him as Zahhak.²⁴⁰ He was truly a Zahhak; he fed himself and his regime with the heads of our young children. In vain he sent them to the front or killed them in jails. People had begun to see how all his promises vanished like wind in the air. His regime of the dispossessed had turned into another despotic regime, with the newly wealthy, new elites' children (*āghā zādeh hā*) worse than those of the Shah.

Once more she raised her hands, only to drop them yet again, now halfway, leaving them suspended in bizarre uncertainty. She repeated what she had said before, "alas, he died too early," but her tone was strange; I could not tell whether her words were meant to convince me or herself, or even to be posed as a question. She herself had not been convinced, for I heard her again, and this time I was the direct addressee.

But, you know this is not new to us. Our wisdom is in our eyes.²⁴¹ People saw him dying in that hospital bed, saw others crying their eyes out for him, and before you knew it, they'd forgotten he was the same ruthless monster who ordered the execution of thousands of our brilliant, highly-educated, beautiful young children. That he encouraged and sent hundreds of thousands of our young kids to get killed at the front in the vain hope of reaching Karbala. Our children spent years in jail, gave up their lives to overthrow the Shah. But he came and in ten years he did more than the Shah and his father had done. He filled our jails and graveyards. His mission was to bring hell to earth, to empty our factories, make a mockery of our religion, turn the entire country into a big jail, and then die, as if he were a mystic, a pure-spirited poet. Such a show they had before he died. Even I could've believed he was an angel, had my three flowers [her executed children] not been destroyed under his feet. On television he was shown sitting on his bed, looking so helpless, so spiritual (*rohani*), so kind, so innocent. Who could have believed or remembered that he was the one who ordered fourteen year old kids to disobey their parents and go to the front? Then he would come out and congratulate their parents for having their children killed. No, this image on television was not like that real Khomeini. He wasn't the one who permitted the basiji thugs to whip the poor elderly man,

²⁴⁰ Zahhak is the notorious mythical figure in Ferdosi's *Book of the Kings* who had two snakes growing on his shoulder. To save himself from being killed by these snakes, he fed them with the brains of two young men every day. His despotic reign lasted for a thousand years.

²⁴¹ This is a common phrase in Iran and connotes that people believe in what they see.

Mr. Rak`ei.²⁴² On television all we saw was him, but it was nothing like him. What we saw was a “fabrication” (*masnoui*), an innocent looking family man, a poet, a saint, not that frowning, ruthless, power-crazed Khomeini.

The color had rushed to Mrs. Gha`emi’s face; her usually soothing voice was slightly shaky and louder. Rage and grief mixed in her eyes as she resumed speaking.

This wasn’t the same Khomeini who had ordered people to report on one another, mothers on their children, children on their parents, neighbors on neighbors. I told you how my children were arrested because one of our relatives reported them. Throughout those three days before his death, we saw him on television, but he no longer spoke to people. Instead he spoke to his family, kissed his grandson, prayed to God. We did not hear his words, for all along, as he whispered, prayed, slept, we heard his newly discovered mystical poems, recited, or heavenly music played. He had tuned inward, as though he had already departed from the worldly affairs, as a politician. How strange this all was! It was as though they knew that if he spoke the angelic image they were trying to create of him would no longer hold; it would be shattered. So, we watched him in silence, in whispering. We were told that he had humbly hidden his incredible talent in poetry. That he was a great mystic poet, no less than Hafiz. Who could say that his poetry was just an imitation? Now that he had killed all his enemies before going to hell, we now had to hear of him of having fallen for the spot on the lips of Friend.²⁴³

Mrs. Gha`emi now stood up, in a gesture that I assumed meant she was beginning her prayers, but she went on to say:

I remember the coup in Mosedeqh’s time. It was very much the same then. People saw a group of people marching for the Shah, chanting “Long live the Shah,” and they believed that others really wanted the Shah to return. They either lost heart in the movement and withdrew from it, or joined the rally fearful that if the Shah returned, they would be in trouble. It was the same with Khomeini. Just before those shows in the hospital, most people cursed him. You could hear

²⁴² Mr. Rak`ei was in his late sixties when caught in a park smoking during the month of Ramadan, in 1981. He died under the basijis’ lashes, from a heart attack. Later his daughter was arrested and jailed as a leftist opponent.

²⁴³ The verse, from the collection of his poem 1998, read: “Man beh khāle labat ey doost gereftār shodam,” (Oh Friend, I fell for the spot on your lips).

people wishing that he would die of cancer. Their prayers were fulfilled. He finally died of cancer but he died too early. So, the funeral seemed to show that most people still loved him. But this wasn't true. The emotions of us Iranians easily fluctuate from one moment to another. Our wisdom is in our eyes.

Little time was left before the sunrise which could turn Mrs. Ghae`mi's prayer into a substitution, less effective than praying at the prayer time. Suddenly, I could no longer hear Mrs. Gha`emi's voice, though her lips were still moving, in whisper. She had stopped conversing with me, and was now in conversation with God, in prayer. In her white chador, with her now calm gesture, she once again appeared angelic. My mind was caught up in the image of her children being shot before the sun rose completely, after which perhaps the executioners and interrogators stood for their morning prayers, perhaps also looking angelic or saintly?

Facing death, Khomeini was no longer burdened with worldly tasks and therefore had no need for his fist or his rhetorical speech. New images and impressions were to be made of him in the media and in people's memories. The camera juxtaposed his silent, spiritual-looking images with hundreds of people's imploring hands, praying for his life, as his mystical poem told of his eagerness to join his lover, God. His poetry was recited repeatedly so that everyone could remember the verse in which he had been captured by the spot on the lips of his Friend, God. In departing the world and its affairs, he was already portrayed in unison with himself, and with God.

Titles as Surplus Values

Khomeini's death was announced in the largest script on the front page of the government newspaper, *Keyhan*, thus: "The Spirit of God Joined God" ("Rooh-e-Khodā Beh Khodā Payvast.") The announcement was reminiscent of two other historical

moments, both in its printing style and in the punctuated verbalization of events. During the revolutionary era, the two significant historical episodes of the departure of the Shah from Iran and the return of Khomeini to the country had been announced in newspapers, also in the largest letters, as: “Shah Went” (Shah Raft), and “Khomeini Came” (Khomeini Āmad), respectively. In both cases, an infinite array of contradictory histories, dreams, sufferings, and joys were condensed in and palpitated behind these abbreviated couplets. Similarly, an ocean of blood, a vast aperture between the revolutionary dreams and the realities of its aftermath, and all the anxieties and hopes for an uncertain future, remained hidden behind the provocatively blunt declaration of Khomeini’s departure: “The Spirit of God joined God” (Rooh-e-Khodā beh Khodā Payvast).

In 1979, the fusion of these two word-sets, “Shah Went” and “Khomeini Came” had been equated with, interpreted as, and turned into a revolutionary slogan,” employing Hafiz’s poem, “When the monster lives, the angel arrives.” The Shah/monster had left so that Khomeini could arrive, no longer as an “Āgha,” but rather an Imam. In the ten-year interval between his arrival in February 1979 and his departure in June 1990, Khomeini was elevated from Imam to a near God. The economy of transpiration of this spectral surplus in his title invokes the memory of another specter, that of surplus value, which appears and is actualized in the market. The sweat and labor enter the market without bodies, in the dead bodies of commodities. These ghostly objects themselves emerge in yet other, even less corporeal bodies, in the form of money, and in the bizarre process of some mathematical additions and subtractions, as surplus value.

In Khomeini's death as well, the invisible bodies and their suffering, the blood and tears of people, which materialized the surplus of his ascendance, were transpired as an excess in the economy of power, also in other bodies and forms. A surplus, the extra word, appeared in the subtraction of the four units, "shah raft" and "Khomeini Āmad," from the five words of Khomeini's death's announcement, "Rouh-e- Khodābeh Khodā Payvast." While the addition of the four letters demarcated the abolition of an old regime and the emergence of a new one, the entirety of "acts of walking" by people whose blood and sweat, disillusionment and dreams had forced the Shah out and brought Khomeini back to Iran were rendered invisible. Thus, what emerged in the market/public, in the excess in Khomeini's position as godly, in the spectral and fetishistic equation and exchange of incomparable qualities, was a battle of apparitions, of monsters and angels, of the Shah and Khomeini. Behind these apparitions hid the invisible collective lives and bodies of Iranians, the makers of history, the producers and the disruptive forces behind the excessive, hegemonic and monotonous rhetoric of post-revolutionary Iran.

As in the market economy, it was vitally crucial for the preservation and circulation of the hegemony of the state to obtain an excess, or surplus, of power in the equation between Khomeini's arrival and his departure. Promoting Khomeini from angelic, to Imam, to the upholder of God's spirit, to Godly was, once again, not an expression of reverence, but rather the fuel for circulating and reproducing the divine legitimacy of a hegemonic system that would have to function without his rhetorical force or corporeal presence. With the former Imam turned into God, the possibility of the emergence of another guardian Imam was engendered. The new metaphoric epitome of

the flight of God's Spirit from the earth, with Khomeini's departure, was to simultaneously release and pump energy into the veins of the state he was leaving behind.

Once again, as with proper names that create and name the void, here as well the more absent the origin, the more essential proper names and titles became in alluding to the non-existent original.²⁴⁴ Mohammad's quality as a business agent had granted him the title of Amin (a good trust-keeper), which in turn became the basis for his being endowment with God's "Trust" (Amānat). For Khomeini, his proper name, "Rooh-ullāh" (the Spirit of God), which was capitalized by state leaders also won support from the people for leading them in the Revolution. Khameneyee's name had the simple luck of being named after the first Imam, Ali. With Khomeini's departure as the original Messenger, a new and a copious version of the "original" history of Shi'ism was to be created. Ali Khameneyee could now transcend into the position of Imam Ali, the successor. Like Imam Ali, this Ali also emerged with uncertainties; new fractions surrounded his succession, as well. The stories of these tensions and the trajectories they have closed and opened up are the subjects of another chapter.

Conclusion: The Flight of the Revolutionary Spirit

In 1979, Khomeini directed millions of people to the martyrs' graves to establish the new nation-state and demarcate the boundaries of normalcy for its citizens, in the image of the ever-present ideal martyrs. Now his tomb-shrine, lying beside, yet outside, of the martyrs' graveyard, was to delimit the boundaries and projects of the new "Reconstruction Era" (doureh-ye-bāzsāzi) for the state and the populace. If martyrs were

²⁴⁴This is also similar to the world of commodities in which the more the use and the exchange values are drawn apart from each other, the more superficially yet rigidly naming and creating desire become. Let's just remind ourselves of credit cards, non-existent gold behind money value, the spectral capital, of national economies as they are constantly disrupted and overshadowed by multinational companies, so on and so forth.

ever-present witnesses, and soldiers of the state, Khomeini's omnipotent shadow was to overpower, legitimize, and offer an ideal model for, state leaders. His ghostly and virtual presence, like that of the martyrs, has continued to haunt and impact the society and state policies. Like martyrs, his presence also sometimes faded only to return with more vigor, in altered capacities and contexts. His re-turns have almost always been accompanied by those of martyrs, and both have been summoned alongside the spirits of the martyrs of Karbala.

Yet, while Khomeini's choice to return to the martyrs' graves marked the boundaries of the normative citizenry and the structure of power of post-revolutionary Iran, it also induced and illuminated the shattering of the elusive, momentary, and fragile, unison of its divergent dreams. The subsequent animosities are now carved on the surfaces of distinctive graveyards. Nowhere else is the corporeal reality of the regime's hierarchical populism better illustrated than in the differences between the cemeteries of official and unofficial martyrs, and Khomeini's singular tomb, "Imam's Purified Shrine" (Haram-e-Mottahar-e- Imam). The spatiality of the story of Khomeini's death, like any travel story, took divergent trajectories. For many, "the Spirit of God Joined God" sketched out paths towards the ultimate vanishing of the remaining dreams of the revolutionary era, as illustrated in several war movies, including those of Makhmalbaf and Hatami Kia.²⁴⁵ The revolutionary fervor and dreams that had marked the reactions of people to Khomeini's arrival in 1979 came to symbolize their vanishing vestiges in 1990.

At his funeral, it appeared as if the yearning of people to touch his coffin or corpse, and their desire to take away something, even his flesh, represented their striving

²⁴⁵ See Arousi -e-Khooban by Makhmalbaf and Az Karkheh tā Rein by Hatami Kia, also see Roxanne Varzi's writings about them.

to hold on to something of that era. For some, this urge to hold on to some piece of objects that belonged to him was perhaps not so much a desire for a keepsake as one of obtaining a material manifestation of magical blessings, a linkage to God and the Godly. Did this stand in for the revolutionary promises that people felt had melted in the air and disappeared, as if God's spirit had taken flight from Iran? Was this not what Mrs. Fatemi felt the country had become after Khomeini, a "spiritless country which just carried the name of Islam?" In fact, during my fieldwork many religious and even secular intellectuals spoke of the country as a place "whose youth had lost its belief in God, or any utopian value," as a land for which "corruption, money and ruthless power had become God," as Nasteran, a mother of two sons and a widow of an executed leftist, suggested.

In 2004, Mr. Kabiri, a former young war veteran, still supported the Regime but made sure to tell me: "I no longer trust any of these leaders as I trusted the Imam." A former Basiji and teacher, Mr. Akbari would still be living in a house "so small that the jail rooms are larger than my room." Also in 2004, Mrs. Fatemi, the mother of an eighteen year old Basiji martyr, would express her disappointment about the state of affairs "after Imam." Her path has led her to feel that "these leaders are destroying everything Imam worked for; they're killing our dreams of a real Islamic country." When I first met Mrs. Fatemi, she told me of her outrage that "in a supposedly Islamic country, there are so few girls' schools with a mandatory chador policy around."²⁴⁶ After three months, I finally found one for my daughter, but I have to pay for the school bus, for it is too far from our home."

²⁴⁶ Schools in Iran are not unisex before college level. Also chador is not a mandatory veil in Iran, except for specific government positions. Therefore, very few schools require girls to wear chador. Manto and "maghn`eh" (a particular kind of hair cover) are the generally required veiling dress codes in Iran.

Postscript: Of Graves and the Act of Walking

The topology between 1979 and 1990, between “Shah Went,” “Khomeini Came,” and “God’s Spirit joined God,” is now translated in a long trip that I took during my fieldwork with Mrs. Gha`emi, to visit her children who were separated from one another in jail and in the cemeteries. The story of those ten years, for Mrs. Gha`emi, is put into practice in the act of traveling to and between cemeteries every Friday, after she finishes her morning prayers.

From her home in the north-east of Tehran, we take several buses and subway trains, pass Khomeini’s shrine, and enter the well-paved roads of Beheshtzahra. The bus rides over the paved roads, past tall green trees and streams with blue running water. We pass a fountain which also has blue water pouring down from its spout. All along the way, we see colorful flowers. She passes all this every Friday, but does not stop until she reaches the barren flat plot of dirt where there is no tree, no flower. Here is the graveyard of the dissident martyrs, where one of her sons is buried beside the wife of her other son. “My daughter-in-law had asked, as her last will, to be buried by her husband. So, to make me suffer more they not only made sure that all my children were not buried in the same cemetery, but that she did not lie beside her husband, even in death. Oh, you cannot believe how deeply in love they were,” Mrs. Gha`emi told me in my first trip to these graveyards with her. That day I had spent the entire evening and night with her, talking about her children and looking at their photographs. So as she told me about their love, their laughing images traveled through my mind. “We can’t stay here for long.” Mrs. Gha`emi tells me as she shakes the dirt off her long black manto and walks towards the exit.

We have a long way to go, I know now, having traveled with her several times. From Beheshzahra to Khavaran, we have to change several buses and minibuses, sometimes even take cabs, on roads no longer as convenient and accessible to public transportation as is Beheshzahra. "I can never spend enough time with my children, for I have to get to Khavaran when other families are still there, since it is not safe for anyone to be there alone," Mrs Ghaemi tells me as we hurry to catch a minibus. At the Cemetery for the Christians we get off the minibus and cross the freeway, which has no pedestrian walkway or bridge. As I hold Mrs. Ghaemi's hand, waiting for a safe moment to cross, I look at her aging skinny figure and think of other, more elderly, mothers. "I buy my flowers here, for I can't go to the square where there are cheaper flowers and more options," she tells me, as we walk into the flower shop of the Christian Cemetery.

Here in this Christian Cemetery is our last chance to see paved roads. This is such a bizarre moment, and more bizarre still is how frequently the moments occur when one catches oneself feeling envious for those cemeteries or sections of cemeteries that have pavements. How could one feel envious for something so cold, so ugly, so senseless, and so apparently meaningless? But over and over I heard of this feeling from the parents, and to be honest, I sometimes felt envious of the Christian families, even of Bahais, for having real tombstones for their dead, for being able to print their names on the graves...for the paved roads, for plants, trees...for knowing where their loved ones were really buried, for having a single grave for their dead. For "not only huge predicaments, but the weirdest little things by which they make us suffer day after day," Zohreh had told me one day as, covered with dust after a storm in Khavaran, we were rubbing our eyes to get the dirt out.

Chapter 3

A Con/fusion of State: The Living, the Dead, and the Martyred in Post-revolutionary Iran

Preface: A Flash Back

1969: riding with my cousin, at the age of twelve, to the village in which she was born and lived and to which I traveled only in summers, I suddenly noticed the cemetery on the hill. Pointing towards it somewhat excitedly I said, "Hey look! Somewhere up there on that hill is my grandfather's grave." In the towns in which I grew up, I had not gone far enough to the outskirts to see the cemeteries, but here on the way to the village, I recalled the visits to my grandfather's grave on this hill. Yet, the frantic reaction of my cousin, who was only one year older than me, shocked me. "Crazy you! Bite your finger, bite it! Bite it hard and fast," she anxiously repeated as I stared at her, puzzled. Finally, not out of conviction but rather mindlessly, I bit my finger and mechanically followed her commands: "put your finger under your foot and press on it as hard as you can; do it before it's too late." I did all she said in dismay and out of some kind of unknown fear. Yet, all this did not bring her comfort. She went on ordering: "Now recite the fateheh!" (the opening verses of the Qu`ran recited also for the dead). I had to confess that I did not know it. Time was pressing and she could not waste it articulating in words how I could have lived for twelve years without knowing the "fateheh." In an agonized tone, she whispered the words of the fateheh. I repeated after her.

Only then, after we had performed all the necessary rituals, did she sigh with relief, as if we had survived a deadly accident. Only then did I dare to inquire: "What did I do wrong?" In a trembling, dead serious tone and without offering any explanation, she commanded: "Never again point to the graves! Never ever again, do

you hear me?” But then, as though taking pity on my dumbfounded gaze, she explained: “You offend the dead and awaken them from their rest. You interrupt their peaceful realm, and they will come and haunt the entire village. If you see a cemetery, don’t point at it; just respectfully recite the “fateheh.” You go to the cemetery and pay respect to the dead but you don’t point at them from afar. That is disrespectful and dangerous.” Chastised, I had entered the village with my finger still remembering the punishment, the bite, and the press of my foot upon it. It was a punishment to stop me from ever again pointing to the sites and the sights of death.

Despite the memory of that punishment, in what follows I will be *pointing* to the sites and sights of death. I hope that awakening the ghosts, instead of offending, will offer them an instant of the time that was so untimely taken away from them by the violent events of war and political suppression. I attempt to portray the conflation of the “habitats” of the dead, particularly of the official and unofficial martyrs of post-revolutionary Iran, with that of the living, not merely as a way of illuminating the discriminatory treatments of their deaths, but also as a means of attending to the living in their innovative, troubled, and challenging relationship with the dead. This chapter explores the sociopolitical dynamics of these conflations and the different ways in which they have come about, been imposed, and lived through. It will demonstrate how in the modern history of Iran, struggles for and against the discriminatory delineation of social terrains for both the dead and the living are intertwined with and disruptive of the discourses and practices of modernity, in particular our dualistic notions of public and private spheres. In doing so, I suggest that the implications of permeating and unsettling the arenas conventionally defined as those of the living or the dead need to be seen in the

light of this dualistic geopolitics of bio-power. The subsequent pages offer a glimpse into the backdrop within which these recent confluences of the spaces of the living and the dead occur and the dilemmas they introduce to the lives of the living.

A flash of Lightning

Perhaps it is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity; the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty, and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity²⁴⁷ (Foucault, 1998:28).

This chapter will begin with the discussion of state martyrs, not with the intention of offering them more of the kind of visibility and voice that “the state and public have already given too much of and much more,” as many people in Iran told me when I informed them that I would be working with the families of state martyrs. As with Foucault’s poetic description of the relationship between the flash of lightning and the night, I hope that revealing the vexing luminosity the state has projected on these official martyrs exposes the density of the imposed darkness into which dissident martyrs and their families have been propelled. In doing so, I intend to bring to light the conditions of that night to which the heightened visibility of state martyrs mainly owes “the stark clarity of its manifestation.”²⁴⁸

As I write of state martyrs, I recall how so many of the families of the dissident martyrs, learning about my work, would initially ask me: “Why would you want to lend

²⁴⁷ This passage refers to the relationship between taboo and transgression which according to Foucault, rather than being black and white, is analogous to the relationship between the flash of lightning and the night.

²⁴⁸ In *The Country of Memory* (2001), Hue-Tam Ho Tai seems to deal with a similar dilemma, when she writes about sacrifices of the northern Vietnamese soldiers while the dead of those fighting alongside Americans in the south are silenced. She ends the book with her own short essay on this very note.

voice to the state martyrs whose deafening noise has sickened everyone, whose stories have saturated our television for years, while our martyrs have been utterly silenced?” Yet the memories of those initial reactions are accompanied in my mind by that of the way their attitudes changed during the course of our conversations, as I shared with them the state martyrs’ personal stories and predicaments. Not only did they accept my logic, but they compassionately helped me unravel the discriminations and hardships also experienced by many families of state martyrs.²⁴⁹

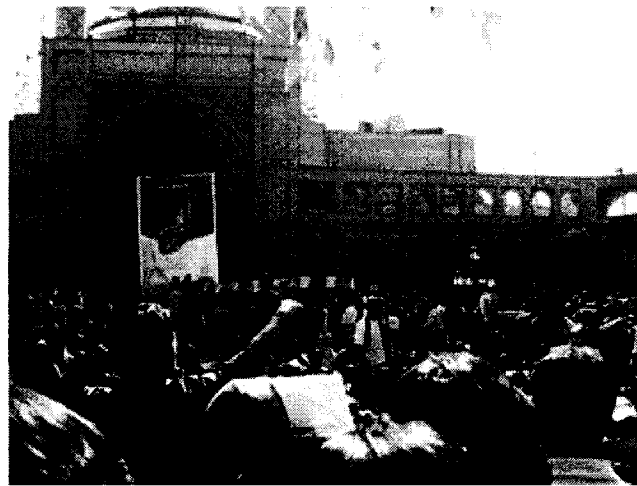
While in relation to dissident families’ suffering, the challenge was to rely mainly on the families’ own stories for their suffering was not written into the pages of the official history, in regard to state martyrs’ families a different problem precluded their stories from being heard. The struggle here was to rescue this real voices and stories from under the colossal piles of monotonous official histories. The task was to illustrate the ways in which the instrumentalized visibility and hyper-commemoration of the state martyrs also deprived these families of their personal grief; and how their grief has been turned into a public exhibition to convey the state’s political agendas. It was critical to show that this hyper-memorialization has led to the current social attitudes--indifference, disillusionment, and stigma--displayed by families of dissident martyrs and others towards the families of state martyrs. On the other hand, not so surprisingly, I often felt compelled to censor myself from mentioning to the families of the state martyrs that my project also included dissident martyrs. For some families of state martyrs were hostile towards the opponents of the regime, particularly the leftists. There were still families who had lost loved ones on both sides and whose experiences and realities were even

²⁴⁹ Throughout this dissertation we will have ample chances to encounter these contradictory realities of the assumed privileged positions of state martyrs.

more complex and ambivalent. While these realities underscore the extent of fragmentation within the Iranian nation, I intend to elucidate the perpetuating elements of these divisive conditions by emphasizing their moments of convergence.

The separation of public and private arenas and thereby the notions of visibility and invisibility are manifested in the struggles between the families of martyrs and the state. As phenomena of modernity, these dualistic notions define not only the spatial experiences of the living but also the borders of life and death. The obtrusive means by which the dissident martyrs have been pushed out of the sociopolitical scene and public sight are actualized within these confined territories. Thus, to highlight the imposed incursion of the state martyrs into the public eye is to render visible, like the flash of lightning, those spots that remain in the dark as a result of this hyper-visibility. In this vein, the following event finds its way into these pages.

Upon²⁵⁰ Empty Coffins (بر فراز تابوت‌های خالی!)



²⁵⁰ “Upon empty coffins” was the title of an internet news article posted on the Peik Net website in March 13th 2006. “Bar Frāz” conveys both a literal meaning of location as “upon” or over, which concerns the coffins that are carried on the shoulders of the people and a metaphorical notion of position, which herein refers to the higher status of these dead over the living. The Farsi phrases in this section are taken from this website’s news section (WWW. Peiknet.com).

(تایوتها را می آورند) "The coffins are brought forward"

In the winter of 2006, just a few days before the Iranian New Year, the courtyard of Šan`ati Sharif University was transformed into a battleground wherein the con/fusion of the geographies of life and death took place. As an internet news article suggested, this clash occurred "over digging a few graves in the middle of Sharif University" and burying a few empty coffins on University grounds. These "empty" coffins allegedly contained the "remains" of unrecognizable and thus unknown martyrs (shahidān-e-gomnām) of the Iran-Iraq War. According to the state, these "lost name"²⁵¹ martyrs had just been recovered from Iraq, more than eighteen years after the end of the war.

A large number of students gathered in protest of this unprecedented act of burying the dead within an academic institution. These protesters cried out: "the University is not a cemetery" (دانشگاه، گورستان نیست), "Ban the instrumental utilization of war martyrs" (استفاده ابزاری از شهیدان جنگ ممنوع) and "Sirs, stop political manipulation!" (آقایان بازی سیاسی را تمام کنید!). Just a few days prior to this event, a general meeting had been held to discuss the state plan for burying "the unknown war martyrs" (shahidān-e-gomanām-e- jang) in the University. 82.5% of the students in the meeting had voted against the plan.²⁵² Ignoring the votes of students and their protest, a small number of

²⁵¹ In Farsi, "gomnām" has two different though often interrelated connotations. It literally means lost name, or someone whose name is lost. It could however imply two different conditions of namelessness. In regard to the living, it often connotes a status of being a non-celebrity, non-famous, a lay person. In this case one has never had a name to lose. This referring to martyrs as "gomnām" could mean non-famous martyrs, those who were not, for example, commanders, or those whose names were not particularly capitalized by the state and its media. The common usage of "shahid-e-gomnām," nevertheless, implies the detachment of the body and the name; when the body of the martyr is not found or it is so shattered that remains are unrecognizable. In this latter form, the names and the bodies are lost to one another, and therefore the dead whose body is lost or shattered also loses his name. For the significance of proper names see Derrida's *On Name* and *Limited Inc.* (1988) and de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) section of proper name.

²⁵² From news in March 13th 2006 on "www.Peiknet.com."

basiji²⁵³ (members of the voluntary army) students and the so called “plain clothes” (لباس شخصی ها) para-military forced their way with the coffins into the already dug graves.

Thus, in Šan`ati Sharif, the most prestigious public university in Iran,²⁵⁴ this initial conversion of an academic space into a graveyard was actualized. The suicide attempt of one of the students of Šan`ati Sharif, in response to being expelled from the university as punishment for his participation in the protest against this burying act, further augmented the conflation of the spaces of death and education.²⁵⁵

Death Inherited!

What is the significance of and the rationale behind burying the martyrs within Šan`ati Sharif University?²⁵⁶ Why the protests and suicide attempts and the officials’

²⁵³ Basij is a voluntary army that was created around and after the Revolution of 1979. Formed as a grassroots and spontaneous army, its goal initially was to defend the neighborhood, during the early days after the Revolution when the state and the army were not yet prepared to completely control the streets and alleys. It eventually became part of the army and was actively involved both in the external war and the suppression within. Basijis are now often seen by the majority of Iranians as thugs and as a violent force of suppression that is unaccountable to the law.

²⁵⁴ This University is well-known for its “farār-e maghzhā.” Brain drain is an equivalent English phrase which refers to the phenomenon common, though not unique, to Iran, whereby the most accomplished and talented intellectuals and educated young scholars or scientists leave their home countries and reside in the west. With its admission requirement which includes only the top 1% of the highest scores in the extremely competitive national university entrance exam, mainly in engineering and the hard science, Sharif University is the most affluent resource for this phenomenon. Over 50% of students who receive their bachelors’ degrees from this college are accepted by the most prestigious schools in the west, including MIT, Stanford, Johns Hopkins, etc.

²⁵⁵ There are different versions of a joke that circulate around in Iran, and are taken up also by satirists in the alternative internet media. This joke, in its various versions, makes a mockery of the confusions of spaces, roles and titles in Iran today and compares it to “the rest of the world.” In Iran prisons are called universities, universities are turned into jails; the dead live forever, while the living are seen as dead, on and on this continues.

²⁵⁶ The history of the names of this University under two regimes is itself a clear manifestation of its significance for both states in demarcating their dominance over the young population and their struggle to sustain it. Under the Shah, it was titled “Āriyāmeh̄r Technology University” (Dāneshgāh-e-Šanati-e-Āriyāmeh̄r) in which Āriyāmeh̄r was the honorary title of the Shah. It literally meant: the sun of Āriyā. It combined the idea of the Iranians belonging to the pure Arian race, and the pre-Islamic belief in sun as the god or deity. The title declared this university as a possession of and a dedication to the Shah, in which the signs of modernity, “Industrial” and his supreme and somewhat unearthly role were fused. The Islamic Republic Regime left its modern signature intact by resuming the “Industrial” in the title. It however altered its possession and dedication to “Martyr Sharif Vaghefi.” By this title, “Sharif Vāghefi’s Industrial University,” the state, first of all, alluded to the history of hostility between Marxists and Islamic activists.

harsh response to the protests? Answering these questions requires unraveling the intertwined histories and hierarchies of the educational system and the martyrs in post-revolutionary Iran. It involves examining the interplay between state-imposed policies and the shifting attitudes of the people, particularly the younger population. Both the act and the protest against it should be seen within the context of the growing body of college students in today's Iran and their intensified disillusionment with the state, illustrated particularly in their violently-suppressed mass movement in 1999. In the internet news commentary, the protest is seen as exemplifying the ongoing tension between the majority of Iranians and the agents of the state, expressed in the students' chants as a conflict over the state's "instrumental utilization of the war martyrs."

Yet, this collision and the students' protest might also be seen as an indication of their discomfort with the culturally anomalous practice of muddling the vicinities of the living and the dead. This sense of discomfort was expressed by many people during my fieldwork, including Ferdous, the widow of an executed leftist and herself a former inmate. Referring to the earlier debate about burying the martyrs in the squares of Tehran, Ferdous complained:

It is not enough that increasingly the cemeteries have come to resemble the cities; unless these sick-minded, death-crazed (divenegān-e marg) state officials turn the cities into cemeteries, they won't feel satisfied, won't sleep restfully. There was a time when we went to cemeteries; now we are being forced to live in cemeteries. It

Sharif Vaghefi was a member of Mojahedin, an Islamic militant Organization, who was allegedly killed by one of its newly converted Marxist leaders. Around the mid 1970s, some members of the organization turned away from Islam and became Marxists. The tension led to the killing of Sharif Vaghefi. Different versions of this story are told by different parties, each blaming and accusing the other. While the Mojahedin Organization was never favored by most clergy members, this did not stop the Islamic Republic from claiming "their martyrs" who were killed under the Shah, as its own. Sharif Vaghefi was particularly suitable in portraying Marxists as aggressive enemies. This title claims the University as the domain of the new state, and establishes the indispensable and instrumental role of official martyrs for the state.

gives me the creeps when I think of walking around with graves under my feet.

To trace the genealogy of these unprecedented practices,²⁵⁷ we must revisit the sociopolitical history of post-revolutionary Iran and its relationship to official, unofficial, or perhaps counter-official martyrdom. Conflations of cemeteries with the spaces of the living and the strategic and tactical²⁵⁸ battles over them have been consistent and multifaceted characteristics of this era. Yet, in elucidating the backdrop of these potentials and practices, of which the event of Sharif University is merely one example, we need to glance over the precedents of such practices of disrupting the comfort zones of the dead and the living.

While unprecedented in universities, this conflation of the vicinities of the dead and the living was by no stretch of the imagination an entirely novel phenomenon. Neither was this university going to remain the only academic institution within whose grounds state martyrs were to be buried. In fact, the decision to bury state martyrs in public spaces emerged and provoked opposition even among some state officials of the Khatami era, during my fieldwork in 2003-2004. At the time, this initiative was limited to squares and mosques. The recent confusion of universities and graveyards, though innovative, is continuous with and an extension and intensification of that initiative. Subsequent to the incident in Sharif University, many of the protesters were suspended or expelled. Only a few days after the protest, Abdollah Ganji, the head of the “Basij

²⁵⁷ To refer to the burying of the dead within the vicinities of the living as an entirely unprecedented practice is not totally accurate. Such conflations have occurred, throughout history, for different reasons. It is only within this particular context that we can speak of it as unprecedented.

²⁵⁸ I am using these terms, strategic and tactical, as in De Certeau's notion of strategy and tactic as the means of the dominant and the marginalized groups, respectively (1984). In the particular context of post-revolutionary Iran, I consider the state and all its supporting institutions and forces as the dominant power vis-à-vis the marginalized position of the dissidents, particularly the leftists.

Counsels for Explaining Universities' Plans" announced that the plan to bury the martyrs in all universities was awaiting the completion of its judicial approval. A few days later, it became a law, ready to be put into action at other universities.

That Sharif was chosen to be the first university adorned with state martyrs' burials, was of great significance, and not merely because it is the most prestigious public²⁵⁹ university in Iran. Nor can its own entitlement with a "martyr's" name, "Sharif Vaghefi" sufficiently explain this pioneering role. The most crucial reason, rather, resides in the student body of Şan`ati Sharif University. Because of the quota allocated to the families of martyrs and war veterans, a large number of students at the university belong to these groups. Moreover, because of the need for an exceptionally high score for admission to this college, the second largest body of students consists of children of the new and old rich, who can afford to send their children to the best high schools and hire private tutors. Many of these students are the children of state officials, or the so called "lords' children" (āghāzādehā). The remaining smallest group includes the most brilliant students of the working class and some children of dissident families. The latter group has been able to enter universities only after 1989, when severe background checks and neighborhood reporting, and other such evaluating policies, were relaxed. It is within this diverse, yet dominantly state-marked, body of students that the burying act and the protest against it reveal their significance. The need of the state to revive the status of the

²⁵⁹ Because of the highly competitive national entrance exams, public universities in Iran are much more prestigious than the private, so called "Free" (Āzād) Universities. Ironically, public universities which are the most sought after are the ones that are free of tuition, while the private ones charge extremely high tuition. Still more paradoxically, since public universities are much more competitive and harder to enter, people have to invest great amounts of money in their children's elementary and high school education. In addition, they often pay for private classes and tutors so that their children get the best education possible to enter these schools. This simply means that except the most brilliant students or those children of martyrs, only the most privileged and wealthy can afford to enter these schools. The private schools are attended by those who live on the verge of poverty. Parents often take out substantial loans so that their children can enter private colleges.

martyrs, even by violently imposing them on such an unconventional space, should be deciphered within the context of current internal and external conflicts and disillusionment towards state policies that now extends to state martyrs' children.

Since the revolution of 1979, maintaining the martyrs' presence in the public eye has been a steady mission of the state. This presence has taken on many modalities and various degrees of intensity due to the sociopolitical dynamics forming and formed by the changing attitudes of the public. However, while consistent with the general state policy of highlighting and maintaining the presence of the state martyrs in the public sphere, the current intrusion of the dead into the vicinities of the living sets a new precedent. In its corporeality, this invasion²⁶⁰ echoes and yet moves beyond the previously symbolic, metaphoric, discursive, and linguistic dimensions of the imposition of martyrs onto the public sight. The obstinacy and velocity with which the public arenas are invaded by coffins and graves introduce a unique quandary.

The bizarre quality of this corporeal contravention and the meta-narrative of this base and basic intrusion of the dead into public locales might present us with other exceptional practices in the future. Yet, I invite the reader not to this future, but rather to the past, to the precedence of this invasion and con-fusion. This journey backward, in search of precedence, ironically will traverse, revisit, and excavate other unprecedented moments. It might also hint at the ruptured and continuous attitudes and concerns that have emerged from, or remained to haunt, the rapid transformations of the sociocultural landscapes of modern Iran.

²⁶⁰ My usage of the term "invasion" might imply an active agency for the dead, as though the dead are responsible for these imposed incursions. I however continue using these terms to suggest and somewhat illuminate the way the state utilizes them as if they are alive and endowed with agency.

یکی بود یکی نبود (There was one; There was not one)!

Any search for precedence implies a search for the “original” moment, for that once-upon-a-time juncture before the inception of something different and new.

Difference is nevertheless defined by similarity as the new always entails the old within.

The search for precedence throws one into the dark bottomless well of the elusive quest for the “origin.” And origins are often fantasies and tales about the past that, though not necessarily false, we tell ourselves to reconstruct them in keeping with the story of our present. Thus, the stories of the origins of these invasions of the dead into the terrains of the living and their originations I herein relate are in compliance with binary spaces and discourses set forth by modernity about life and death, public and private, and so on and so forth. In this journey to the past, while traveling on urban highways I have often digressed in order to meander on the remote, unknown, unmarked, curved, and unpaved paths, in search of the marginalized.

For the families of martyrs, the struggle to attain social recognition for their loved ones’ living and dying is by no means a mere philosophical matter--this issue is even more salient for the dissident martyrs’ families for whom the state has banned public mourning for and commemoration of their dead. Rather, it is a struggle to establish the recognition of their dead as social beings, as humans. As Mrs. Rohani, a mother of an executed dissident, told me, “this does not simply mean to perform all the rituals for humans when they die, of which they [the state officials] have deprived us. But this also means to show others that our loved ones lived as social beings like others.” For Mrs. Rohani, the banning of mourning and lack of marked graves do not simply write off their

self-sacrificing deaths, but rather “they throw them into such oblivion (nisti) that if we do not tell others of them, it would appear as though they never lived.”

For families like Zohreh and her mother, therefore, more challenging than the loss of their loved ones is the possibility that their dead might die a social death. The challenge is to create novel possibilities for, and ways of, mourning and commemoration against all the odds and barriers that are imposed on them. For Zohreh, whose three executed brothers’ lives and deaths have been sunk into imposed silence and the absence of graves, the quest for the markers, traces and signs of recognition of their deaths is existential. Zohreh explained this “inhumanity” by which their dead were treated by the state: “When I was a kid, my chicken died. I buried it and put a marker on its burial. It was much more like a grave than my brothers’ are.” For these survivors, to reclaim their dead ones’ social life and death is the key to escaping from the cage of an obligatory life, a life that they live not for their own sake or for the sake of life itself, but rather for the sake of their dead ones, so that their dead can live on and be recognized as dead. This implies emancipation from the death that is feared not for the loss of one’s own life but for the impossibility of living and dying socially. Public recognition thus offers these families a liberating possibility: a possibility of mourning for the impossible mourning.

While the families of the dissidents struggle for their social space, for many of the state martyrs’ families the challenge is how to mourn their losses and reclaim their grief in their private homes, away from public scrutiny. Mrs. Mohebbi, the mother of a state martyr, exemplified this challenge: “I stopped having anniversaries for my son’s martyrdom after four years. I know the neighbors think that I have gotten over my grief and gone on with my life. But I just could not take it any more. They came here, sat and

gossiped as I bled in my heart for my loss. I was tired of putting on a show. I just wanted to be left alone with my grief.” Unlike the predicaments faced by the families of the dissident martyrs in their struggle for recognition of their dead, for many families of the state martyrs, including Mrs. Mohebbi, the dilemma is to live their lives under the constant suspicion of a “privileged recognition.” Of this suspicion Mrs. Mohabbi complains: “We cannot carry a new refrigerator or any other new furniture to our house without all the neighbors’ eyes suspiciously staring at us, without hearing their whispers that we have been given them for free by “Martyr’s Foundation” (Bonyād-e-Shahid). Nor can we go to pilgrimage or even to Mashhad without being accused of using our status as a martyr’s family. [Mashhad is the holy city to which people visit mainly because of the shrine of Imam Reza, the eighth Imam of Shi’i]. Every one thinks that whatever we have is because of our martyred son.” If the lives of the dissident families are burdened by their effort to prove the lives and deaths of their dead ones, those of the state martyrs are overshadowed by the weight of recognition and presence of their dead.

As with these experiences, our story of origin, like any story of origin, is also one of inconsistencies. The tales of origins told here constantly contradict themselves and one another. The categories are introduced but they often do not remain solid. In their efforts to make sense of all that does not make sense, these stories resemble the opening of every Iranian tale, always beginning with “یکی بود یکی نبود” (there was one; there was not one).²⁶¹ They venture to tell of the time when the spaces of the dead and the living did not intermingle, and of the incidents which changed that era. Yet the very definitions and boundaries of spaces are themselves modern inventions. The experiences and events

²⁶¹ I am told that Arabic stories also begin with the same ambiguous phrase “there was and there was not.”

presented here will sometimes touch us to our marrow. Nevertheless, all in all, when this chapter comes to its end, the reader might feel a sense of betrayal or confusion with which every Iranian tale ends, not because these stories are unreal but because their shocking reality challenges our efforts at making sense of them and our common sense.

The Politics and Poetics of Rhyme, the Order of the Things, and the Conclusions

Following an ambivalent opening, there was one; there was not one, all Persian tales flow into the mesmerizing and captivating stories which suddenly come to a provocative disclaimer at the end, when the wise grandmother or mother concludes them with the harmonious and rhymed final words: “bālā raftim mās̄t bood; pāyin omadim doogh bood; ghessehye mā dorooḡh bood²⁶²” (we went up it was yogurt; we came down it was churned sour milk; our story was a lie). Yet, in response to the puzzled stare of children, the grandmother might change the order of the words of the ending and recite: “bālā raftim doogh bood pāyin omadim mās̄t bood, ghessehye mā rās̄t bood” (we went up it was churned sour milk; we came down it was yogurt; our story was true).

By altering the positions of a couple of words in keeping with the rhyme a radical transformation is achieved; a blink of an eye and a lie turns true. The possibility of reaching these opposing conclusions to the tales is anchored in the locations of four words in three verses. If the word “doogh” is placed in the second verse, it will rhyme with “dorooḡh” (lie) and our tale is inevitably deemed a lie. The instant we posit “mās̄t” in the second verse, the rhyme would turn our tale into “rās̄t” (accurate, true). The selective words and the fixed rules of rhyme at once create and limit the possibilities of these modified conclusions. The poetics and politics of the rule of our grandmother’s

²⁶² Only in Farsi is the rhythm conveyed: (بالارفتیم ماست بود پایین اومدیم دوغ بود قصه مادروغ بود)

conclusions were rather simple. Perhaps to save us from nightmares, she declared her tale as true or false, depending on its painful or pleasant content. Yet, to train our mind for complicated and ambivalent scenarios, she occasionally recited both endings.

Striving to unravel nonsensical, ambiguous, and dreadful experiences and events, in the coming pages, we will come face to face with the ambivalent choices that are employed by subjects to live and decipher their everyday life. The politics and poetics of the subjugating rules shape and are shaped by different tactics and within limiting possibilities. By stretching, sometimes even aiming to dismantle, the boundaries of these old structures and rhymes, these families render their own conclusions to the stories. The challenge is to maintain the complexity of these ambivalent situations: conveying their truthfulness, while situating these convoluted realities within a hegemonic, even if fragmented, sociality.

In a piece titled “The Year 1360 (1981) Still Burdens Our Shoulders”²⁶³ Monireh Baradaran, a former leftist inmate whose brother was executed in 1981, writes of the contradiction between the “freshness of scars on the bodies and the memories of those who have experienced the events of that year,” and the obliviousness of those who did not live through them. Reminiscent of the contradictory possibilities offered by the rules of rhyme and the *rāst* or *doroogh* of the end of each story, she suggests that “it is expected from those who value human rights to agree at least on one point: that the acts of the state in 1981 (1360) were crimes.” Reflecting on the writings of Akbar Ganji, a former supporter of the state and now an outspoken dissident journalist who suggests the

²⁶³ See www.gooya.com, Monday, August 7, 2006.

impossibility of a collective agreement on “historical realities,”²⁶⁴ she offers her own version of the truth of the events of 1981 which have scarred her dissident body and memory. For her, 1981 marks “the end and the beginning points.” She writes, “1981 is an end to insisting on the revolutionary demands, a beginning to the shattering of human dignity, an end of shame for the Islamic Republic, a beginning of a tragic process.” Finally, as if combining the regime’s truth with her own, she concludes that “1981 was a beginning to the process of the decadence of the system and challenges to its legitimacy, coinciding with the beginning of its fortification.”

Despite their partiality for political parties, as actual experiences these events are deeply implanted and have left fresh and vivid scars on the bodies and souls of the related families and the nation. No matter how far we seek the genealogy of precedence for these experiences, no repetition or precedence can diminish the impact of violence and its traumatic, always shocking, dreadful, first time, occurrence.

بود یکی بود یکی *Of the Thresholds, Of the Terrains of the Living and the Dead*

It was not that long ago when the cemeteries in Iran were built outside of residential areas.²⁶⁵ This was done perhaps to avoid too much proximity with the dead,

²⁶⁴ Baradaran writes in response to Akbar Ganji, a former Revolutionary Guard and government official, now a dissident journalist. He was jailed for speaking out against the “Chain Killings” of the dissidents in Iran in 1999. Released from jail after six years, he has been traveling in the west and collected several awards for his “courageous journalism.” In his recent lectures, he has suggested that all parties and individuals in Iran should “forgive but not to forget” and work together towards building a democratic country. Since there would be no possible agreement on the readings of the truths of those events, so claims Ganji, they should be seen as symptoms of revolutions. He rejects revolutions and suggests peaceful ways for change. His views have provoked heated debates among dissidents of which Baradaran’s piece is an example.

²⁶⁵ While the cemeteries have been built outside villages and cities, there have always been exceptional shrines of saints around which villages were established. Although many of these shrines are seen as hoaxes, but the important issue is that most people in the villages believe in them as the burial sites of certain saints. In fact, as Dr. Hossein Kamaly reminded me, there is a shrine within “Beheshti University” in Tehran. While the existence of these shrines within residential areas appears to undermine my argument about the exceptionality of burying the dead within the spaces of the living, these shrines are also unique

and the sight of death.²⁶⁶ Perhaps Iranians also believed that death “colonized by its overwhelming thought”²⁶⁷ (Pandolfo, 97:239), and thus they recoiled from permanently gazing upon it and the danger of becoming overwhelmed by its thought. Perhaps they also felt that “in the infinity of that vision” people could forget “their children, property, the work in the fields” and with death in sight the “world and its affairs” would disappear for them (239).²⁶⁸ Maybe it was against this possibility that the cemeteries were never built within villages, towns, or cities. In a manner similar to dealing with the sacred and polluted, the dead were kept in a delicate proximity and distance. There was however yet another concern that determined precisely how and where the dead would be put to rest. The living were not to remain absolutely blind to death and its “omnipresence and vividness.”²⁶⁹ In relation to this necessity of a place for the dead, Vincent Rafael asks a profound question: “What sort of sociality could exist that did not have a place for the

cases. Saints are believed to be pure and thus different from the ordinary dead. This very notion of purity relates them to martyrs who are also portrayed as pure and sacred.

²⁶⁶ Neither the separation of the spaces of the dead and the living, nor the disconcerting feelings about their conflation, are ahistorical and universal phenomena; they are rather very much modern emergences. In Cairo, for example, a community of urban poor lives within the cemetery, in the so called “City of the Dead.” (Nedoroscik, 1997).

²⁶⁷ There are of course functional and practical reasons for the treatment of the dead and the location of the burial sites, in different societies. One could offer hygienic reasons for the separation from the dead, or suggest the problem of transportation for the proximity of the cemeteries. Dr. Hossein Kamaly, for example, suggests that burying the dead within villages would have caused contamination of the waters due to irrigation system in countries like Iran (private conversation in April 2006). Religious dictums are also significant. I have intentionally chosen not to pursue a functionalist approach. I am more interested here in the cultural, ethical, and religious, grounds for the emergence and disruption of these practices.

²⁶⁸ I am alluding here to Stefania Pandolfo’s poetic account of burying the dead in a Moroccan village where the result of seeing death is characterized as a besiegement, thus a temporary loss of interest in worldly affairs, a return to which is rendered possible only by an Angel who, as these Moroccan villagers explain, appears at the burial site, and “sprinkles a handful of earth over our heads. It is the earth of forgetting and makes us blind, once again to the paralyzing vision of Death. Again we can see the world, set back into its boundaries by our blindness, and again we caught ourselves in daily affairs” (1997: 239).

²⁶⁹ Rather than the sight of death and burial, Benjamin is more concerned with the experience of dying, which he suggests has now been pushed out of rooms and houses and into the hospitals. (1968: 93-94).

dead” (2000:91)?²⁷⁰ According to Rafael, this out-of-placeness will cause the survivor to “resist the closure of mourning,” and causes “the dead [to] live on, eluding mourning and memorialization” (pp.91-92). The absolute dismissal of death from sight could, on the other hand, lead to a diminishing of human experience and wisdom, as suggested by Benjamin. Perhaps, in cognizance of the significance of worldly affairs and wisdom, the Iranians’ cemeteries were built not within, but on the way in or out of, villages and cities.

Every arrival or departure from one’s hometown therefore entailed a delicate encounter with the houses of the dead, in a not too overwhelming yet perceptible imminence.²⁷¹ Every journey outside of one’s home was to be also a reminder of another possible journey, of an ultimate departure, a final trip. So was too the arrival, the souvenir of which could be the news of one’s death. Traveling was hence not merely a means of discovering new horizons and venues in life, which, according to Benjamin, enriched the art of story telling, but also of remembering one’s dead ones, and the looming possibility of one’s own death.

Within the vicinities of the living, nonetheless, life was to be lived without too many signs or significations of death. Especially because of the dictates of Islamic law, the dead were to be almost immediately buried, in relatively distant graveyards.²⁷² They

²⁷⁰ Rafael discusses the implications of the photographs of the dead bodies, and specifically the “numerous photographs of Filipinos killed in a battle” during the Filipino-American War of 1899-1902 (2000: 87). Having transformed the corpses into “what Ronald Barthes would call ‘living images of [the] dead,’ these photographs, as Rafael points out, engender “a hopelessly out of place” quality for the dead.

²⁷¹ Human concern with the spatial temporal relationship of the living and the dead has been a constant preoccupation manifest not only in the shifting and enduring features of religious, and sociocultural landscapes of different societies, but also in artistic, literary, critical and philosophical inquiries. Freud attempts to draw an “appropriate,” universal time period for mourning and a return to life by liberating oneself from the “lost object” (1963). Exceeding the economy of expenditure of grief, according to Freud, turns mourning into melancholy.

²⁷² It is noteworthy to attend to this difference between the ways in which most current Christian funerary practices keep the dead in sight for at least a couple of days for the living to pay their respect and bid farewell. In Iran, on the other hand, according to Islamic law, people are expected to visit the dying person

were to be kept at bay, in propinquity to but not in the midst of the living. Although ghosts never entirely disappeared,²⁷³ their appearance, even in dreams, often instigated distress and anxiety. The wandering ghosts usually signified the maltreatment of the dead by the living. These irritated spirits could easily sneak out of their sanctified spaces (graves). Crossing the forbidden threshold to the world of the living, they could engender the shock of the uncanny.

To evade their sudden appearance and thus the shock thereof, it became imperative to predict, schedule and seek solutions for their possible emergences. It was predicted that, after being trapped in their dark solitude for the entire week, the dead would eventually feel bored and miss their loved ones. On Thursdays,²⁷⁴ people believed that the dead would feel the urge to leave their graves and wander around their houses,²⁷⁵ sometimes simply for getting a taste of life, even if only by looking at the routine activities of their families or other living. Yet, even this innocent meandering of harmless spirits was felt to be perilous to the living, for it disrupted the boundaries of life and death. To prevent untimely intrusions, the living were to console the dead by paying

but after death the ceremonies are performed rapidly and the body is taken out of sight immediately after the necessary rituals are completed. Any touching of the dead renders the living polluted, obliging a religious ablution. Coinciding with my fieldwork, I experienced this tension when my father passed away. While my sisters and I could not keep our hands off our father's body, our women neighbors constantly dragged us away from him and reminded us that it was not sanctioned to touch the dead, and that the dead needed his peace and his emotional strength in order to be able leave this world for the long journey to the other world. Not our remorse or cries, what our father, and the dead in general, needed for this journey, we were told, were the words of God recited in the room to prepare him for his first night in his dark, cold, and lonely grave, for his first interrogation session as a dead.

²⁷³ In fact certain ghosts appeared in dreams to foretell the future, offer advice, and in general relate the world of the dead to the living. But the more claims to modern rationality, the less accepting the society became of the ghosts and their dreams, yet perhaps more frequently they appeared and conflicted with this rejection.

²⁷⁴ For some Islamic countries, including Iran, Thursdays and Fridays are considered the weekend days.

²⁷⁵ In fact, the presently continuing practice of visiting the cemeteries on Thursdays and Fridays is the remaining trace of this belief.

visits to their graves; if you did not go to their homes, they would come to yours. Visits to the cemeteries and the accompanying rituals were mandatory to maintain the required distance between the two universes, of the dead and of the living.

Yet like every threshold, this one as well was not to remain fixed for eternity. What led to the disruption of these comfort zones had less to do with the transformation of common beliefs than with the disproportionate growth of the populations of both the dead and the living. On either side, their territories were inevitably stretched, as a result of the increasing population. The carefully maintained distance between the terrains of the dead and the living could no longer be safeguarded; they penetrated one another, sometimes to the extent of merging and nearly turning into a single landscape. Despite all these changes, the general features of the topographies of the dead and the living and their essential characteristics, nevertheless mainly remained within previous boundaries.

The Revolution of 1979 and the inception of the Islamic Republic not only revolutionized the discourses and embodied practices pertaining to life and death, but also metamorphosed their landscapes. The violent and sacrificial deaths of the revolutionary era led to the actualization and therefore diversification of the resilient discourses of martyrdom; no longer a predominantly discursive phenomenon, martyrdom was now incarnated, in the flesh and blood of hundred of thousands of Iranians. The emergence of this massive group of dead, having died untimely deaths in such a brief period could not but transform the landscapes of the cemeteries. Both quantitatively and qualitatively, these deaths eventually introduced distinctive features and dynamics to the societies of the dead and the living. With diminishing distances from the sight of death,

the living were now to live with their gazes captured, no longer by life and its daily affairs but by circumstances of the afterlife.

Stretched Graveyards: Whence Homes, Whither Burials?

Beginning with the Pahlavi dynasty, the societies of the living and the dead became garlanded with the souvenirs of progress, the poison and honey of modernity. Thanks to the modernizing project with which both Reza Shah and his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, were obsessed, especially from the mid 20th century on, the cities became overpopulated by constant waves of immigrants from rural areas.²⁷⁶ With progress also came increased life expectancy, more so in the cities than in villages. Rather than its pretended goal of freeing peasants from the tyranny of the landowners, Mohammad Reza Shah's White Revolution of 1962 achieved its actual mission; it made surviving in the villages a near impossibility, thereby forcing villagers to migrate to the cities as cheap labor. The massive importation of American and Thai rice, Israeli oranges, and Pakistani wheat, left Iranian agriculture unable to compete. One after another, the Iranian villages were deserted either partially with the departure of their young population or in their entirety with the migration of all villagers.²⁷⁷

As already marginalized cheap labor, these newly arrived villagers began forming new communities by building their shanties in the peripheries of large cities. Uprooted from their past ways of life, no longer producers of essential products, these surplus laborers became sources of surplus for the capital of which they were themselves

²⁷⁶ For the history of the Pahlavi era, see *Iran between Two Revolution* by Ervand Abrahamian, 1982. Princeton University Press; *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretative History of Modern Iran* by Nikki Keddi, 1981, Yale University Press. *Land Reform and Social Change in Iran* by Afsaneh Najmabadi, 1987.

²⁷⁷ For a detailed history of progress under the Pahlavi Regime see, Fred Halliday's *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, Penguin Books Ltd, 1978, and Abrahamian's *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 1982, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

deprived. Having left their homes and villages behind, in a state of destruction, with their energy being wasted in daily anticipation to be randomly picked up as day laborers or exploited in non-familiar lines of production, they often lived in the neighborhood of outdated factories and expanding cemeteries. The more their lives depended on monetized relations, and the more new masses of laborers joined them in rapidly growing shanty towns, the closer the cemeteries and the neighborhoods of the living moved toward one another.

Capitalism and modernity, as Adorno and Horkheimer point out, have brought death and sacrifice under control; though, they have not dismantled either of them. In the realm of bio-power the logic of self-preservation, longevity of life, and self-sacrifice are combined. The state cares for the well-being of its citizens so that they can sacrifice themselves to produce more capital. Sacrifice, in this sense, is rendered gradual and more calculative. It occurs on a daily basis and in the process of re-production of capital by the masses for the benefit of the few. In Iran, in particular, where oil was and continues to be the major source of national income, money and death are even more intimately linked. The Iranian laborers, who were often recent migrants from villages, displaced, and disoriented, with unfamiliar languages, cultures, religions, family values, died many deaths in the loss of their former selves. Of course they also died natural or untimely visceral deaths, of old age, illness or because of the accidents of machines. As long as they were not seen as deviants, their death was acknowledged, though rendered as marginal as their life. The state determined if they were needed to die gradual deaths as laborers, be sacrificed “untimely” as soldiers,²⁷⁸ or killed as unlawful citizens. Deviance

²⁷⁸ Even though under the Pahlavis, especially Mohammad Reza, there seemed to be no long term war, military conscription was never abandoned. There were always internal wars and suppressions in which

encompassed all those who were perceived as the outcast, the criminal, the poor, and the dissident. Under the Shah, these individuals were seen as anti-modern, anti-progress. Eliminated, they were thus unceremoniously buried in undistinguished parts of the cemeteries.²⁷⁹

With the fluctuating power of the state, definitions of the national duties of citizens were also elusive and shifting. The history of capitalism has been ambivalently and yet inevitably interwoven with the creation of solidified nation-states and the constant disruption of their boundaries for capital, under various pretexts. If Indian and African soldiers had to die for colonialist wars, Iranian soldiers under the Shah's Regime fought and died outside of their country to keep the region safe for the US. These sacrifices bestowed the Iranian state with an "honorary" title: the "Gendarme of the Region." The more foreign investors found a fertile ground for cheap labor and a secure market in Iran, the greater was the Shah's belief in the possibility of realizing his ambition "to lead Iran to the gate of great civilization." Yet, the closer the country seemed to be moving towards this gate, the closer its cemeteries, factories and residential areas grew toward one another.

Contamination, Bodies, and Body Politics

Hence, the enlarged size of cemeteries and the stretching of the boundaries of the vicinities of the living and the dead had already begun with the growth of the population of both groups under the Shah. The distinction emerged when the Islamic Republic

soldiers fought, killed and were killed. There were also short term external wars, including occasional conflicts with Iraq.

²⁷⁹ The killing of the state opponents or the unlawful individuals did not fall under the state's definition of "sacrifice." In his book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Giorgio Agamben argues that the life of such individuals is perceived as bare life and cannot be sacrificed. It is simply eliminated.

defined martyrdom as self-sacrifice for Islam, and thus honored as “martyrs” (shahids) only those individuals who had died, according to the regime, for the state and thus for Islam. The opponents of the state were stigmatized as “the warriors against God” (mohāreb-e- bā khodā). With the Shah’s regime gone, neither the living nor the dead remained united. Martyrdom was no longer defined as the voluntary, conscious, self-sacrificing acts of individuals for a just cause, which included also secular opponents of the Shah’s Regime. With the discriminatory recognition of deaths appeared segregated graveyards, within or outside of mainstream cemeteries. The inconsistent delineation of these deaths not only justified the segregation of the dead within and outside the cemeteries, but it also was the very reason for the invasions by the dead of the terrain of the living. The seeds of such intrusions were planted in the particular ways in which the dominant and alternative discourses of martyrdom were approached, shared, and contested.

After the eruption of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, nearly every cemetery in Iran came to possess a distinctive section called the “Flower Garden of Martyrs” or “Martyrs’ Paradise,” named as a manifestation of the revered status of martyrs and an imitation of their final destination in paradise and its gardens. Standing apart from this section and the graveyards of the “ordinary” dead are the burial grounds of the “dissident martyrs,” that are located either in poorly-maintained parts of main cemeteries, or in separate cemeteries in isolated and remote areas. By no means a novelty of the post-revolutionary regime, stratification has been a durable feature of the societies of the living and the dead since long before the Pahlavis. Privileged economic status defined one’s higher social position not only among the living but also among the dead. Yet, both under the Shah

and the Islamic Republic, the domain and the possibilities for attaining socioeconomic power were demarcated and controlled by and in relation to the state. Both regimes granted their warriors of all domains—economic, military, political—a high yet always conditional and temporary prestige and power. In both regimes, the impassable threshold was safeguarded by the omnipotent position of a single untouchable person, the Shah in the Pahlavi Regime, and the supreme religious leader under the Islamic Republic.

The seemingly secular regime of the Shah and the self-proclaimed “true representative of God on Earth” Islamic Republic, were both led by God-like leaders who were immune to contamination. The rest of the people were human, thereby possible targets of pollution. Under the Shah, even his family members, or Howeida, his devoted prime minister for thirteen years, could be sacrificed to maintain the purity of the regime.²⁸⁰ By the same token, Montazeri, to whom Khomeini referred as the fruit of his life, who had been chosen by Khomeini as his successor for the position of the Supreme Religious Leader, was stripped of his status by Khomeini for deviating from his path. Pollution and transgression from the sacred rules of the state and its leaders were the ever-present peril under both regimes.

The worst danger looming for both states was nevertheless the danger of epidemic contamination, the contamination of and by the populace. The polluted people could turn their back even on the untouchable ruler, as they did with the Shah. Their transgression urged the Shah to act out of character; he was forced to apologize and acknowledge

²⁸⁰ Under the pressure of the revolutionary movement, in his desperate attempt to save himself and the regime, the Shah gave up his Prime Minister of 13 years, Howeida, and had him arrested, which resulted in his execution only a few days after the victory of the Revolution.

having heard the message of their revolution.²⁸¹ It was this pollution that turned the Shah-loving nation so uncharacteristically, against him. So contaminated had the people become that even their humiliating defeat in 1953 to the CIA-planned and sponsored coup d'état did not stop them from, yet once again, raging against the Shah. As in 1953, they once again forced the Shah into tears and to exile. From this exile there was no return.

Similar epidemics have erupted under the Islamic Republic, from the very early stage in provinces populated by minority ethnic groups, to student movements, workers, women, and so on, all of which have been violently suppressed by the state on the pretext of purifying the nation. The soldiers have fought outside of Iran as well as within, killing their marginalized Kurdish fellow country people, no longer for, but on the pretext of fighting the US. In spite of all these similarities, there exist critical differences between the way pollution was perceived and treated by the two regimes.

Under the Shah, deviance was mainly defined in hygienic terms. The opponents of the regime were perceived as contagious bacteria or viruses the elimination of which was necessary for the maintenance of a healthy nation. This does not mean that the Shah did not appeal to religious discourses to promote his legitimacy. Ahmadinejad, the current Iranian President, is not alone in claiming that his presence in the United Nations, under God's supervision, froze all its members on their seats with non-blinking eyes as he gave his speech there. The Shah also claimed to be especially watched and protected by God (*nazar kardeh*). He claimed to be immune to threats by being under the

²⁸¹ This is an allusion to the Shah's televised address to the nation a couple of months before the victory of the revolution in which he said: "the dignified people of Iran! I heard the message of your Revolution." This speech should be seen within the context of months of state officials' repetitive references to people's uprisings as tape-recorded or as the acts of foreign instigated troublemakers and thugs.

protection of Imam Reza, the eighth Imam of Shi'is. Neither his bodyguard who was killed for him nor his bullet proof vest were held responsible for his survival in assassination attempts.

Yet, under the Shah, the language of medicine was often deployed to refer to political deviance and transgression from the norms. Prison torturers even referred to themselves as doctors.²⁸² The torturers of the Islamic Regime, on the other hand, were either “the guiding brothers” (barāadaran-e- ershādi), or “agents of making humans” (mamoorān-e- ādam sāzi). Political dissidents under the Shah were patients who were offered torture and time in jail, as doses of healing medication. When medication failed, execution was the necessary surgery for eliminating the possibility of contamination of the rest of the body of the nation. The road to prison was a road to the hospital or laboratory, as the torture rooms were called under the Shah. The interrogators in laboratories were to discover the kinds of bacteria or viruses that had caused the illness, and the right dose of torture and time in jail, or surgery, was to cure the illness or eliminate the incurable contagious agent.

In the language of the interrogators of the post-revolutionary Regime, however, the last curved road right before turning to Evin, the most notorious prison in Iran, was “Repentance Turn” (peech-e- tobeh). This turn or “peech” to the prison, and all that awaited within prison, were to convert sinful lost souls into repentant ones. Torture was called “tazir,” or “Had,” supposedly a limited punishment, to salvage the soul from the infinite torture of Hell. Torture was a means of consecration, which like sacrifice, as Bataille (1992) suggests, did not have to result in an utter annihilation, but rather in the

²⁸² See Abrahamian's *Tortured Confessions* (1999) and Rajali's *Torture and Modernity* (1994), about elaborate details of techniques and terminologies of torture and imprisonment in modern Iran.

isolation and elimination of the thing, the profane, from the spirit, the sacred. The profane was to be annihilated, either within the still alive inmate, which meant the saved prisoner had become a “repentant” (tavvāb), or killed, in order for the body of the “ommat” (Muslim Community) to be protected from possible contamination with profanity.

These different languages of contamination also described the societies of the dead. Under the Shah, the poor, the outcast, the unproductive, and the political dissidents were signifiers of deviance from, and blemishes on, the perfection of the healthy body-politic of modern Iran in its journey to “the gate of great civilization.” When incurable, these patients were eliminated, for the sake of a healthy nation. Hence, residents of beggars’ houses, mental institutions, and jails, were often gathered in the same sections in the cemeteries. Outside of the sterilized terrains of the living, they no longer seemed to pose any danger to the body politic and body of the nation. As long as it did not function as an organ, the eliminated body did not threaten the nation. As dead, the deviants were thus left in peace in their marginalized graves, cut off from the body of the nation.

For the Islamic Republic, on the other hand, the profane was contagious even when dead; it remained contaminated and contaminating through the polluting soul which remained alive. Dissidence, either as alive or dead, epitomized profanity and presented a great threat of pollution to the sacred. The segregation of dissidents’ dead bodies and their graveyards from the other, especially those of the state martyrs, was therefore vital to the Islamic Republic.

Death Stratified: Segregated Houses of the Dead

Fragmentation, as people repeatedly reminded me during my fieldwork, has been a perpetual and steady feature of Iranian society and particularly severe in the post-revolutionary era. The ironic yet inevitable outcome of Khomeini's command to establish the "Unity of the Word" (Vahdat-e Kalameh) was manifested in the constant polarization of society. In fact, the first decade following the Revolution of 1979, which saw the Iran-Iraq War and the subsequent political suppression, was characterized by an imposed elimination of differences. Constant discoveries of subversion and its eradication simultaneously upheld and yet undermined this "vahadat-e kalamah." People were divided into two major camps, albeit with constantly shifting constituencies and with some vacillation in between.

Those individuals fitting within the officially determined criteria of upholding "unity" (vahdat) were perceived as "those belonging to us" (khodihā), with "us" representing the state and therefore Islam. Any diversion from the dominantly defined principles automatically relegated people to the other category, as "those not belonging to us" (nakhodihā), deviants from Islam. The so called "red line" (khatt-e-ghermez) between these two constantly condensing and expanding camps demarcated the difference between Islam and its enemies. Hence, while the grounds and frontiers characterizing belonging and non-belonging have floated according to the changing dynamics of power, the divisive titles have continued to remain in use, applied and applicable to both the dead and the living.

At the core of these contradictory realities are the often contested yet shared meanings and significances assigned to the discourses and practices of martyrdom, and therefore to martyrs. This complexity is even manifested in the “original” meaning of the Arabic term “شهيد-shahid” (martyr), which also implies being a “شاهد-shāhed (witness). While this connotation has been promoted discursively and practically by Iranian official and religious discourse, it has not been directly taken up by the leftists, nor is it so simply perceived by a majority of Iranians. In reality, the presence of martyrs has been continuous in various ways in the lives of the survivors and the society at large. Despite ironic convergences in ideas of martyrdom, the intricate characteristics attributed to different martyrs along with drastic divides between the statuses of the “official” and the “unofficial” martyrs have been mainly reinforced by the relationships of their respective families with their loved ones’ bodies, graves, and cemeteries.

In contrast to the polluting bodies of the dissident martyrs, the official martyrs, recognized by the state as having died an exemplary, exceptional death, are perceived as utterly purified. Sanctified by martyrdom, they subsequently ascend to the apex of the pyramid in the community of the dead. Ayatollah Morteza Mottahari, a distinguished Islamic ideologue who himself became a state martyr, writes about this distinction: “In Islam, the body of the dead is considered impure and thus requires ritualistic cleansing and ablution.” Martyrdom, on the other hand, renders pure, “not only the body, but also the clothes of the martyrs.” Mottahari goes further in arguing that “the sacredness of the soul becomes embodied both in the clothes and the body” (1980: 80).²⁸³

²⁸³ Mottahari also suggest that “in Islam there are words that possess a special sacredness” and that “a halo of light has surrounded...the word *Shahid*” (martyr)” (1979: 73). This material connection between the sacred soul of the martyrs and their body and clothes has had tangible and pragmatic implications for their families and the society at large of which I will write in other chapters.

Deified, the martyrs attain the double characteristic of the term “shahid,” as ever-present shāheds, witnesses/martyrs, as well as saintly supernatural power. This extraordinary, nearly supernatural, power of martyrs has been implied in the triptych portrayals of the Iran-Iraq War martyr Reza Haghighi, exhibited in the “Museum of Martyrs” in Behesht-e-Zahra Cemetery.²⁸⁴ These three photos of Reza Haghighi and their accompanying captions are represented as evidence of the exceptional capacity of martyrs. In the first photo, we see a newly dug open grave within which lies the body of a young soldier with his eyes closed. By the grave sits a woman in black chador. A couple of revolutionary guard officers are sitting or standing next to her. According to the caption under the first photo, this woman is Reza’s mother. The caption tells us that upon seeing her son’s dead body, the mother implores him to open his eyes, so that she can see his eyes one last time. In the second image, as the caption suggests, the mother’s wish is granted; thus we see Reza’s eyes semi-open, with a smile on his lips. Having satisfied his mother’s wish, in the third photo, based on the caption’s explanation, Reza resumes his death. The eyes in the third photo are once again closed, though a mild smile remains on his lips. I would have added another line: a gesture of happiness for having fulfilled his mother’s wish.²⁸⁵

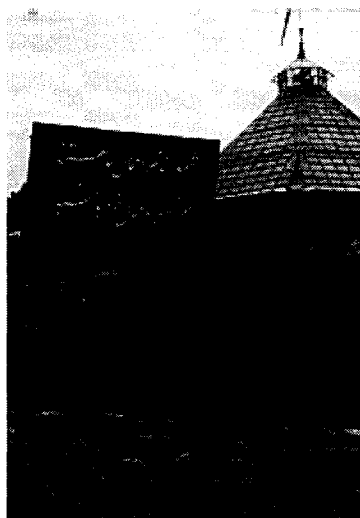
This absent presence of the martyrs and their divine power has been actualized in their frequent, though not necessarily less uncanny, appearance in the midst of the living,

²⁸⁴ The fact that these sets of photographs are significant to the representation of martyrs in this museum is evident in their location in the hall. They are placed immediately on the left side of the entrance to the hall, so that visitors would see, and get the impressions of them, either right in the beginning or in the end of their visit, depending on which side of the exhibition hall they begin their visit. In either case, one’s experience of the visit to the museum is overshadowed by this image.

²⁸⁵ Two contradictory views went hand in hand under the Islamic Republic: obligation to embrace martyrdom even against parents’ wishes and the saying that satisfying a mother’s wishes would lead one to paradise.

in their foretelling of the news of everyday life, advising the living about daily affairs, and revealing the conditions of afterlife. Claims to transpirations of martyrs in visions and dreams prevail in the government sponsored media.²⁸⁶ Utilized by government media, these appearances act as messengers who convey particular political, ethical, or religious messages, always attuned to the spirit of the time, based on the needs and agendas of those in power. Even as dead, the state martyrs are employed to perform their role as the soldiers of the state, working as its arms and eyes to implement its laws and maintain its red lines and taboos.

The Ever Present Soldiers of the State



Imagine an early morning hike in the mountains in a cold winter. Imagine seeing no one all the way almost to the peak of the mountains. Imagine coming across a small

²⁸⁶ An example of this incredible phenomenon is manifested in a television movie in which years after the end of the war, a middle-aged former Iran-Iraq War veteran, now married and a successful though still pious executive, decides to take a trip to Mecca, responding to a call in his dream for pilgrimage. On his way to the airport the cab in which he rides hits a pedestrian, a young tall Jesus-like man with long blond hair and a long white robe. Already ghostly looking, the man falls unconscious. Later we learn that he is a chemically afflicted war veteran about to die, and yet the movie implies also that he has already joined the dead. Upon seeing each other the two men recognize each other, for the young man is the one who has appeared to the other in his dreams, asking him to go to Mecca. The movie constantly deploys and fuses the boundaries of the dead and the living; presence, and absence; intent, action, and speech; the boundaries between reality, dream, life, and death are all rendered blurry.

building, just before the peak, not an unusual sight as a temporary shelter for the hikers. But now imagine your gaze being suddenly captured by the spectacle of an inscription in large letters on a board standing disjointedly on two metal poles. Read the board as shown in the above photograph. It reads: “Martyrs are witnesses of our acts; Watch your behavior!” You would then learn that the building is not a shelter for the mountain hikers, but a host for the graves of the “unknown, lost name, martyrs” (shahidan-e-gomnam).

I climbed these mountains in a provincial city in a cold winter of 2004. The friend who accompanied me on this hike was familiar with the area and had repeatedly come across this board and this indoor cemetery built about two years before. He seemed not to even notice the board. I, on the other hand, despite all that I had seen on the streets and other public spaces, was amazed by this particular warning on the top of a mountain. Later that day, having been joined by friends, we discussed the effects of such an exaggerated emphasis of the martyrs’ presence. I explained my sense of it by telling the story of my brother who, when four years old, faced a dilemma in going to the bathroom. He had just learned that God was everywhere and could see everything. “The poor thing was about to burst until we were finally able to convince him that God had more important things to do than watch people in the toilet,” I told my friends. Referring to the board on the mountain, I asked them: “How does it feel to you guys to see such warnings in these unexpected places?”

The ambiance was that of joke and cynicism. Afshin, a young college student in his early twenties responded: “We convince ourselves of the same thing that your brother was convinced of. So much shit is going on around here with this filthy regime and those

holding on to it up there. Who's got time to watch our shit?" Anosh, his college friend took a different tone in his comment: "When you create a suffocating sense of surveillance, the result is often numbness and indifference. You just ignore all the repetitive bullshit around you and go about living your life. This is true of the role of God, state, and even parents. Too tightly fastened the disciplining ropes, more struggle to tear them apart! More taboos, more transgressions! Doesn't our way of life in today Iran's show you this?"

But since the revolution, the state martyrs have appeared everywhere. Through martyrs, the state attempts to acquire longer arms. Through their eyes the domain of state surveillance is expanded; from their mouth its messages are spoken; and by means of their ears deviant ideas are detected and eliminated. With martyrs employed in these capacities, the already elusive and contradictory sources of state power are even more dispersed, "harder to trace back to a point where someone shoulders the blame." (Nelson, 1999: 27). Marx suggests that revolutions, particularly those of the 19th century, "summoned the spirits of the past, borrowing from them their names...in order to enact new scenes in world history" (Marx, 2002: 20). The prominent leaders of the Revolution of 1979 also summoned the spirits of the dead, particularly the martyrs of the Karbala Event, to simultaneously instigate revolutionary zeal as well as delineate and curtail its horizons. Yet the post-revolutionary state's appeal to its recent martyrs, in diversified capacities, was mainly to assist it in articulating and implementing specific ethical and sociopolitical regimes of knowledge and power. Since its inception in 1979, the state has posited itself in an ambivalent role as the modern nation-state, a republic and yet the representative of God on earth. The martyrs have been employed in both capacities: as

the sacred spirits, the “awakened consciousness” (vojđān-e bidār) of society; and in an earthly role as the ideal unwavering soldiers, who are the arms, eyes, ears, and mouth of the state. The families of the martyrs receive these dead individuals’ monthly pensions, regular privileges, and bonuses, as though being remunerated for their continued services.

As the distance between the Iran-Iraq War and the so called reconstruction era was lengthened, the need of the state to utilize martyrs to maintain the faith of the people in the state increased. Yet the more martyrs are utilized for political agendas, the more disillusionment sets in towards them. The proliferation of jokes about martyrs, war veterans, and all that is related to the war, speaks for this reality, as do the protests against the state policies of burying the martyrs among the living. The recent imposition of martyrs’ corpses onto squares, universities, entertainment arenas, even onto mountain peaks is hence an indication of the need for reinvigoration, and the recognition of a fading reverence for the martyrs and the state in society.

The Precedence of the Unprecedented Dead Invaders

Paradoxically, however, it was the opponents of the regime who were in fact the pilot subjects of this nearly unprecedented practice of burying the dead within the vicinity of the living. The bodies of the dissident martyrs were forced into the privacy of their families’ living spaces, not to public locales, as has been the case of the recent corporal imposition of the state martyrs. Just as most medical research begins with experiments on the non-human or on marginal individuals, in this adventure too leftist dissidents were first subjected to the practice. Perceived as lesser humans, marked as too contaminating to be buried alongside Muslims, some of those dissidents killed in the peripheries of the

provincial eras, in the early 1980s, were utilized as pioneers of this unprecedented practice.

While burying the state martyrs outside of cemeteries is in general a recent practice,²⁸⁷ a reaction to and a revival of their relative waning public presence, for the dissident martyrs it took place in the early period of the regime, when political suppression was still unsystematic. It occurred prior to the massive executions and killings that provoked the emergence of segregated plots within the main or alternative cemeteries.²⁸⁸ This was a time of transition, a liminal stage, between the collapse of the old regime, and the early stage of the formation of the new one, during which the killings happened. In this transitional period, the bodies of dissidents who were killed in provincial towns by the state or paramilitary groups were dropped in front of their families' houses. Deemed contagiously polluting, these dead were not allowed into the cemeteries. Their families had no choice but to bury them in the grounds of their own yards. The elimination of those perceived as deviant took place while discourses concerning these practices were not yet crystallized, and mechanisms for dealing with these corpses had not been entirely figured out.

In 1981, when Setāreh was in her early 20s, her young leftist husband was attacked and killed in his bookstore by the paramilitary Basijis, for selling “non-Islamic”

²⁸⁷ Even though there were many cases of burying some selected state martyrs in the monumental mosques of small towns or villages, for instance, in Aghā Khan Mosque in Kāshān, these incidents drew less public attention, at least not of the public in the capital city, or of the national media, which the new practices in Tehran have engendered.

²⁸⁸ This practice was never entirely discontinued, for the regime and its paramilitary forces haunted dissidents by abducting them, killing and leaving them on the streets, even outside of Iran, but during 1999 and 2000 it took its toll in what came to be referred to as chained murders during which the dissidents intellectuals, often poets and writers, were brutally killed and left on the streets or in front of their houses. Fortunately this time the families did not have to bury them within their own yards. There were already established spaces for the dissident dead.

books. They dragged his bloody body through the streets and alleys of this little town and left it in front of his home. This was the house in which Setāreh lived with her husband and her husband's parents and their then five year old son. The officials refused to grant them any burial spot in the public cemetery. Setāreh and her father-in-law buried him in the very same yard he had so often played in with his son. To hide it from the son, they flattened the earth and covered it with leaves. "I lived a nightmare those few months after his death and before my arrest with Behrooz, my son," said Setāreh about the experience of burying her husband in their yard. "I trembled every time Behrooz played in the yard. I kept worrying that he somehow might accidentally discover his father's body while playfully digging out the earth, for he loved to play in the dirt." The possibility of imagining such an exposure had become a recurring nightmare of her waking and sleeping life. When she spoke about it twenty five years later, her eyes were still alight with the fear of that possible encounter.²⁸⁹

The perilous possibility of the revelation of such a "grave secret" to Behrooz was however by no means the sole concern for Setāreh and the family. Nor was the disconcerting feeling engendered by the conflation of their home with a burial ground, which impregnated their every move in the yard with the shock of the first and repetitive realization of their loved one's death. Their trauma and subsequent emotional distress were further complicated by practical dilemmas. With this treasure in their backyard, the

²⁸⁹ If Setāreh succeeded in protecting her son from seeing his father as a decomposing corpse in his playground, she could not prevent him from facing the scene of her own tortured body crawling into the prison cell; nor could she do much to hold him in her aching arms to reduce the intensity of fright in the eyes of her five to six year old son confronted by such impossible situations.

family could not sell the house to move out of the neighborhood which was not friendly to them; for no one wanted to purchase a grave-home.

The house and the burial ground had also turned into a prison. The beloved son, husband, and father, had now become a warden, converting the house into a prison for his family, and a potential burial ground prepared to swallow the entire family upon their death. Setāreh and her son eventually chose to leave the treasure behind to live for life, not for the dead. I met them in Germany, where Behrooz had turned into a handsome young man whose musical talents expressed more than his often quiet character betrayed. His mother watched him, “resemble his father more every day.” So she told me, hoping that in watching him grow older she would get to see that which she did not have the chance to witness in her beloved dead husband. Her love for Behrooz had that complex and strange sense of a doubled love, the love for the husband gone so young and beautiful, and for the son growing close to that age, also young and beautiful. In her care and love remained the fear of another loss, the possibility of not seeing the transition to the older stage of the son-father.

The Rules of the Exceptional and the Exceptions of the Rules

As is the case with some medical experiments which remain at the margins to take off only later, two decades passed before the practice of burying the dead amidst the living was actualized. Now it was in the public sphere and therefore a reality and concern for the people. Instead of the imposition of the disgraced dead of the marginal groups onto their private spaces, the officially-honored dead encroached on the territory and gaze of the public. Now the streets, mosques, universities and mountains were seized by state martyrs. It appears that facilitating transportation to the cemeteries of the

martyrs, via well-maintained highways, the bus and subway system, and the free trips to Beheshtzahra Cemetery, have proven insufficient in promoting the state's agendas. Nor has the state's legitimacy been preserved through the saturation of its media, street murals, or other discursive capacities of public arenas, with the martyrs' presence.

The changing power and sociopolitical conditions in Iran have modified the status of and the needs for using the martyrs. The current US threat to Iran, on the one hand, and an indifferent attitude of the populace to the martyrs, has led the state to force the martyrs on the living, no longer just discursively but in their corporeality. This anomalous cultural practice is meant to achieve precisely what any aberrance is supposed to provoke: public attention. If for the families of the dissidents the struggle to make their dead ones visible to the public is a struggle for the recognition of their social existence, for the state, keeping its martyrs present to the eye of the public is tied up with its own legitimacy, its own eye of power. This is a struggle to reclaim power through the recognition of state martyrs, even by forcing them back to the public eye. With the state no longer in its popular era, when the state martyrs were recognized as Khomeini's "light of the eye" (*noor-e- cheshmi*), this eye has to re-turn as the eye of surveillance (*Cheshmān-e-morāgheb*). That the living must live under the stare and the spell of death--lose interest in life, live for and with the dead and for death--is part of the state project of restructuring and reasserting itself as well as refashioning the nation. The dead are therefore brought back to live with, and in the midst of, the living, so that the living live and die, recognizing themselves as the citizens of the nation and its state, captive by the gaze of the dead.

Yet, just as stories like Setāreh's were temporary and exceptional incidents, those of the recent events with the state martyrs remain anomalous. However, their singularity by no means undermines their impact on, and formation of, the normative forms. In the case of the dissidents, the rule behind this odd practice was the attempt of the hegemonic power to erase these dead or living individuals from the public sight, pushing them to invisible private spaces. The goal was the isolation and eradication of the opponents, dead or living, and the wiping of any signs or signifiers of dissidence from sight.

The recent moves to bring the state martyrs to the forefront and into the public terrain, with all their unique features, are continuous with and an intensification of the enduring challenges and struggles of the state to utilize the state martyrs for sociopolitical agendas. These exceptionalities remind us of Benjamin's notion of the violent incident which in the very act of breaking the law becomes the law (1968). The exceptional invasions of the dead into the realm of the living highlight, take precedent, and suggest formations of general and normative treatments of violent untimely deaths under the Islamic Republic. In post-revolutionary Iran, cemeteries are essential landscapes within which the rules and their transgressions play out. Khomeini's decision to give his first speech, immediately after his return from fifteen years of exile, on the graves of martyrs signified the instrumental role of martyrs and cemeteries in the structure of power.

Yet, both the anomalous imposition of the dead onto the grounds of Šāntati Sharif University and the protests against it epitomize the changing needs, means, and attitudes of the society and the state. Like the flash of lightening "which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation," these contradictory potentialities in recent Iranian history also owe their

manifestation to one another. In their “harrowing and poised singularity,” they illuminate both the productivity of those normative regimes of power within and out of which they transpire, as well as their very limitations. They manifest the process of executions made into law, and the imposition and transgression of the law. The next chapter will map out the rules out of which the exceptional practices described here emerge and the conditions of possibility of their violations.

But what of now, of the changes and precedents? In 1969, pointing to a cemetery, according to a rural girl, was a horrific act that could offend the ghosts, force them out of their graves, and create frenzy in the lives of the living. In 2006, the grounds of Sharif University turn into a cemetery, and on mountain peaks the dead police the behavior of the living. In 2006, nearly every village has some martyrs’ graves within its living space. What are the larger implications of these transformations? A great many people within Iran, including both scholars and many of the families of the martyrs with whom I have had long term contact, perceive these shifts as the sign of a return to the long gone past, and “the non-modern nature of the Islamic Republic.”²⁹⁰

Yet, I would argue against the prevailing Orientalist views in the West, which have massively been imported to the “Orient,” that perceive the political religiosity of the Iranian state as incommensurable with modern discourses. I rather perceive the very formation of the state and its discourses as the product of and as productive of modernity. As Adorno and Horkheimer suggest modernity perceives any unknown phenomena as a source of terror and thus turns it into sacred. It is in the very context of the enlightenment

²⁹⁰ An Orientalist example of this notion is the Homeland Security spokesperson, Michal Chetrof’s claim: “We think of our traumatic and tragic events [like the fifth anniversary of September 11th] for a brief time and we get over it. These people [the Islamic fundamentalists] are still caught up in those tragic events that happened over a thousand years ago. These people have a different mentality.”

that the Iranian state has deployed the language of the sacred for its own illusive power and the ghostly presence of state martyrs.

In tune with the totalitarian nature of the Enlightenment, of which Adorno and Horkheimer so jarringly speak, and in the way of constructing and governing the nation, the ideologues of the Islamic Republic incorporate myth, deity, and the stories of origins to formulate their system of power and knowledge as a political religiosity. Also in keeping with the same epistemological discourses are the chants against the state's relation to martyrs phrased as "political game" and "instrumentalization of the martyrs." Not myths, but mythology, not origin, but genealogy, not return to the past, but archeology, not ghosts but ever-present spiritual soldiers, not religion but modern-digitized, technical, and techniques of religiosity, are the means by which the state constructs and reconstructs itself and normalizes the lives and deaths of its "sovereign" subjects.

What of today? The night that the flash of protests denied, is reinforced in the silence that follows their suppression. Ferdous, a former inmate and the widow of an executed dissident, hopes that this night will vanish with the "arrival of the day." However, for Payām, Ferdous' son, her mother's hope is merely a utopian dream for "every revolution would die out, leaving in its aftermath, only a disaster, as yours [the Revolution of 1979] left for us." For every day, Payām would tell us, "will itself be overtaken by the emergence of yet another night." For many, that day, "that spring of freedom" (*bāhār-e-āzādi*) that transpired in the dawn of the Revolution of 1979 was to soon be replaced by a long night. So early on did the night fall on Setāreh's family that even the night itself had not yet claimed its arrival. In the course of two years, the norms

of the suppression were systematically laid out. Five years later, her husband was massacred along with thousands of others; the incident gave birth to the unmarked mass graves.

For Payām, these experiences of jail and losses marked his life as early as when he was two years old. In 2004, in his early twenties, he told me: “You know what I agonize over more than anything else when I think about my life? That I have no memory of my childhood in which I have really laughed; I mean having laughed loudly, you know like the way I see these kids laugh, with real genuine happiness. Now every time I see kids laughing, I get angry. I feel like crying. Do you know what I am saying?” But childhood was not Payām’s only source of frustration and resentment. “My father was an engineer, a brilliant student with great scores all his life. But now what? He is dead? I can’t openly speak about him. And here I am. I had to go to “private college” (Dāneshgāh-e-āzad) while several of my classmates whose fathers or even uncles were considered martyrs got to the best schools. So what that my mother and our friends speak of my father as a martyr behind closed doors? What good does it do for me or my sister, or even for my mom? She works like a dog (mesl-e-sag joon mikaneh). We do not set the terms here. It is the regime. And my mother and her friends are just fooling themselves, while I am being exploited for this stupidly mediocre salary about which I can’t even complain and you know why? For there are no jobs out there; even this one I have gotten through my mom’s friends.”

I began this chapter with the state martyrs, with their imposed blinding visibility and forced incursion into the spaces of the living, in the hope that, like the flash of lightning, it could illuminate the invisible and hidden experiences of the dissident and the

state martyrs. As with the flash that “loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty, and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity” (Foucault, 1998:28), to end this chapter will not end the obscurity but will rather give it a name. The whispers and dreams will go on till twilight, and into the other chapters.

Chapter 4

The Living Monuments of Mourning: Struggles to Reclaim Life and Death in Post-revolutionary Iran

“On Transience”

“The kids no longer care about the martyrs these days!” Standing by the grave of a martyr in “Golzār-e-Shohadā” (the Flower Garden of the Martyrs), these words were uttered by a casually veiled²⁹¹ woman in her mid to late 40s, whom my friend, Fereshteh, and I came across while visiting Behshtzahra Cemetery. Her friendly response to my greeting and even to Fereshteh’s filming of the grave encouraged me to initiate a conversation with her. We began talking as the intense gaze of a young man in a large framed photograph seemed fixed upon us. Beneath the photograph, on a dark marble gravestone, in neatly carved letters and in vertical order were inscribed his complete name, his father’s first name, his date of birth, his military affiliation, the location of his death, and... Suddenly, the anthropologist in me seemed to vanish.

The one who was standing on the grave with her knees trembling was an “other” me—the one who had lived those years of war and political suppression, who was scarred by the injuries and memories of those years. As her eyes read the words: “martyred fighting anti-revolutionaries in Kurdistan Front in 1982,” she felt her heart ripped apart from her chest; it fell down at her feet where her eyes were now frozen, staring at the words. As though enlivened by a magical spell, the words began to vibrate. Erratically dancing around, they engendered a stormy unrest in her mind. As she stood there, frozen,

²⁹¹ For the lack of a better term, from now on I will use the phrase “casually veiled” in this dissertation to refer to the way most women currently dress in Iran, at least in most big cities. Despite the wide range of different styles, colors, and fashion designs in women’s clothing, especially among the youth, the common feature in women’s clothing is their often colorful and loosely worn scarves which do not completely cover their hair, a manto, no longer as long and loose as it used to be in the early years of the revolution, and pants, that nowadays are worn in many different colors, styles, and even lengths.

with her eyes arrested by the rambling words, suddenly the gravestone seemed to move. Half-way up from under the stone there appeared a head with dark, thick hair.

Now the body of the anthropologist was inhabited by a little girl who was witnessing a *shabih khāni*.²⁹² The memory of that *shabih khāni*, in which an artificially crafted head, hanging on a spear, had suddenly begun to speak as Imam Hussein, had kept that little girl awake for many nights. And here she was, once again witnessing yet another head rising from the dead. This head appeared not on a spear. Rather, it transpired from beneath the grave, a head with a bearded and mustached face, two dark penetrating eyes from which hatred radiated. And with the head arose a right arm which was holding a thick whip. The knees of the woman--which one?--began to tremble: the interrogator? Her nerves screeched.

In the midst of this storm, the poem following those words on the gravestone, expressing this dead revolutionary guard's love for martyrdom, Imam Hussein, and Khomeini, looked tarnished and fuzzy. A misty memory of that poem lingered in the foggy mind of the anthropologist who was hesitantly reemerging. Later, watching Fereshteh's video clip of the grave, she would feel like she had come across something she vaguely remembered having seen in a dream.

History in Translation

"Martyred fighting anti-revolutionaries in Kurdistan," this phrase inscribed on the gravestone of the revolutionary guard had evoked the entire history of post-revolutionary Iran and its historical translation. The literal translation referred to the movement for autonomy of the Kurdish minority in Iran in Kurdistan Province in the 1980s. The

²⁹² The reader will recall that *shabih khāni* is a religious reenactment which commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his companions that occurred in an uneven battle with Yazid, the Caliph of the time, in the seventh century in the desert of Karbala.

movement, which was supported by most leftist organizations, was violently suppressed by the regime. Yet the more complex translation of this phrase on the gravestone has to do with the way the history of the present is constructed by the Islamic Republic in association with that of early Shi'ism.

The term anti-revolutionary, in this sense, encompassed all and every kind of dissidence to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Political inmates were targets of extreme animosity for they represented the opposition within the country. With Khomeini and the Islamic Republic reified as the sacred authorities, any opposition to them was conjured not as mere sociopolitical dissidence but rather as sacrilege. Any gesture of civil disobedience was labeled as a satanic war against the divine. In this translation,²⁹³ the dissidents of the regime were related to one another through their kinship to Yazid, who in the collective consciousness of Shi'i Iranians was seen as the most notorious archetypal enemy of Islam. In Khomeini's words, the Battle of Karbala had spilled over into every day and every place,²⁹⁴ so that every conflict was fought as another incarnation and continuation of that prototypical battle.

Thus, in those early years after the Revolution and in the midst of revolutionary and religious fervor, some of the supporters of the regime did not find enough relief for their accumulated energy in the severe beatings and killings of political inmates in jail.

²⁹³ My intention in speaking of the writing of history as translation is anchored in two interrelated ideas about language. On the one hand, language is always already a translation, which is never entirely one's own. Rather, it is always half of others, as Bakhtin suggests. On the other hand, I perceive this manner of writing history in relation to the past analogous to translation, in which the original text is indispensable but what emerges as its translation is a new text. Following Benjamin's analogy, I also find this relationship similar to the familial relationship, wherein the resemblance between family members is often sought and assumed only after the relation is revealed. More importantly, my reference to translation is suggestive of the significant role I attribute to language and its manipulation in contemporary Iran.

²⁹⁴ In Khomeini's words "har rooz āshurāst, va hameh jā karbalāst" (every day is Ashura and every place is Karbala).

Even their participation in the Iran-Iraq War seemed not to suffice to subdue their collective hatred towards the enemies seen as embodiments of all the enemies throughout Shi'i history, particularly those of Karbala. [How does one avenge a dead enemy?] As if in Nietzsche's notion of eternal return, or in *shabih khāni*, the frontiers and characters of this battle with the enemy were always "repetitive" yet new: a novel repetition. In its repetitive novelty, every new incident resembled the blossoming of the trees every year anew while entailing within all years of growth and damage. This recent history also encompassed the energy of the guilt, hostilities and sins as if of the entire history of Shi'ism, in its new occurrence.

The relationships that the Islamic Republic constructed between itself and the original divinity and between its enemies and the archetypal satanic forces were based neither on a conventional kinship model nor on an identical similitude to the "original." In its recreation of the "origin" anew, in every instance, it in fact was analogous to Benjamin's analogy of kinship in his essay: "The Task of the Translator."²⁹⁵ Benjamin compares the relationship between the "translated" and the original texts to that of kinship, which he suggests is not necessarily about similitude but about an "embryonic" connection." What emerges in this connection between languages which is also a revelation of their differences, is a "pure language," Benjamin infers. This language, according to Benjamin, is historical rather than natural. Yet it precedes history and disrupts temporalities. While the translation is never original, its relationship to the origin is "indispensable."

²⁹⁵ Benjamin, Walter. 1968. "The Task of Translator" *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt, Trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books.

This relationship between the translation and the original is reminiscent of the association between the Islamic Republic and “original” Shi`ism. The incarnation of early Shi`i characters and events in the figures and incidents of the present is not so much about their likeness to one another as it is about the translation of one history into another. In this translation, the “original” ancestors, Yazid and Imam Hussein, are portrayed as the respective prototypes of all enemies (*doshmanān*) and all friends (*yārān*). The relationship between these ancestors and the characters and events of the recent history is not one of identical similarity, or a mere repetition, but is rather is an indispensable link, a growing out of, or a selective repetition and continuation, similar to that found in a blood-based kinship relation.

As in translation, where the more creative and artistic the translator, the less “authentic” the translation, the translation of enemies and friends by the Islamic Republic is by no means a mediocre, faithful translation, but rather an imaginary and imaginative recreation of the original. The conflicts of recent history were portrayed as an extension of the original battle fought between two hostile “clans or extended families” (Bowman, 2006:27).²⁹⁶ In this battle, all opponents were represented as carriers of and heirs to that bloodshed and that crime, as participants and counterparts of that mytho-historical battle in Karbala.²⁹⁷ Seen in this light, regardless of the specificity of their historio-political characteristics, all the new enemies were connected to a general ancestral intent, manifested not solely in the past but in the future. No wonder that Lājevardi, the chief

²⁹⁶ Bowman, Glenn. 2006. “A Death Revisited: Solidarity and Dissonance in a Muslim-Christian Palestinian Community,” *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa*. Eds. Ussama Makdisi and Paul A. Silverstein, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press.

²⁹⁷ The connection was in fact far more ancient; it went back to the time of Cain and Abel, to the relation of the good and the murderer brother, to the primordial, original time of creation, when Islam was present not yet as revelation, but as potential.

persecutor in the 1980s, would tell Shirin, a pregnant leftist woman inmate in 1982, that “even your fetuses should be killed before they are born for they carry your blood in their veins.”

There seemed, therefore, to be no contradiction in accusing all state dissidents of similar crimes: spying for the West, moral corruption, being Zionists, Communists, and so forth. This kind of connection to origin, particularly to the Karbala Event, was the rationale behind Ayat-allah Gilāni’s deliverance of death sentences to the teenagers who were affiliated with the Mojāhedin organization. While trying them for having allegedly sprayed pepper in the eyes of the revolutionary guards in a demonstration against the regime, Gilāni argued that they had in fact sprayed pepper in Imam Hussein’s eyes. He declared that “whatever crime is committed against our “pāsdārs,” (revolutionary guards), or our “basijis,” (voluntary militia) and our regime is a direct offense to Imam Hussein and God himself, and thus a heinous crime and an unforgivable sin” (broadcasted on prison TV channel in 1982).

To fight Islam from within was the most unforgivable crime; hence, ethnic conflicts, women’s movements, class based struggles, and criticism in the media were interpreted as forms of hostility towards Islam and by extension to the Islamic Republic. Dissidents were labeled spies and considered as fifth columnists of all the contemporary world enemies combined. The fight against them was thus carried out with extreme vigor. The cemeteries and jails expanded on a daily basis to hold the bodies of those who were subjected to the vengeance of the regime which declared itself “the only true representative of God on earth.” The frontiers of the battle were wide, expanding in prisons, from Kurdistan to Iraq; revolutionary guards fought enemies on all these fronts

with intense hatred and commitment. For these fights they sacrificed their lives. From the internal wars in Torkeman Sahra, Kurdistan, and the external war with Iraq, many returned dead; those who had fought for the state were officially recognized and revered as martyrs, while all others were forced into silence. Acquiring recognition for their deaths and sacrifices continues to preoccupy the families of the latter group, while their undesirable ghostly presence haunts the state.

***From my Journal:** The anthropologist within me instantly evaporated, as my eyes read the words “martyred fighting anti-revolutionaries...” The void was filled with the images of those prison guards and the injured bodies of the political inmates in the 1980s. A double ambivalence characterized this encounter with a torturer who is no longer alive to be accountable for his act, and his untimely self-sacrificing death. Having entered the realm of the dead—a realm that in the Iranian cultural belief one is expected to respect, this ambivalence is even further complicated. And here I was standing on the grave of a “martyr” whose families were concerned about the loss of care and reverence for the martyrs. How does one make sense of and write about the transformation of a person from a killer to a martyr, who in the dominant discourse is perceived as becoming purified in the very act of martyrdom (April 2004)?*

Outside the realm of the dead, the challenge for me, as an anthropologist who shares her body with a former inmate, is to conduct my research while the scars and memories of torture and the images of destruction of the lives and homes of Kurdish people in the hands of men like him are still vivid. Standing there on the grave of this “killer-martyr,” realizing the untimely nature of his death, imagining the certainty with

which he must have sacrificed his life for “his just cause,” identifying with the pain and the grief of his surviving family, the inmate-anthropologist was left in dismay and confusion.

In the remaining pages, we journey to the houses of the dead, the distinctive landscapes of the graveyards of the state and dissident martyrs, to offer a glimpse into these sites in which memories of violence in post-revolutionary Iran and their recognition is contested today. Within and on these graves are hidden and engraved the history of self-sacrifices in the external and internal wars and political suppression, many of which have sunken into silence, into a non-occurrence. Through the exposition of these deaths as events, I hope to lend voice to those surviving families whose painful losses have become further complicated by the predicament of their burden of responsibility in continuing to live as proofs to the death--and thereby the once-lived lives--of their loved ones. These cemeteries are the vicinities in which claims to “authentic” martyrdom are contested, and the surfaces on which the memories and histories of the post-revolutionary Iran are carved.

The Flower Garden of Martyrs

“What was your relationship to him?” I, the anthropologist, asked the woman on the grave. “He was my cousin,” she told me. “You must have been very close to him that after all these years you still keep coming here,” I proposed. *[Was there a judgmental tone in my voice, that of the former inmate?]* As though to refute my assumption, she explained, “My parents are buried in a different section here [Beheshtzahra]; I come for them anyway.” It seemed to me that she was undermining her loyalty to her martyred cousin when she went on to explain, “It is much easier to travel

this long distance having company. Having come all the way here, my cousin visits my parents' graves, and I visit my cousin's."²⁹⁸

As with the gift, the reciprocal nature of these visits seemed to annihilate them as events. Having occurred in a culturally-bounded family relationship and a pragmatically shared long journey to a similar destination, from which both parties benefited, these visits turned into trivial exchanges and were hence dismissed, if not as non-genuine acts then as inconsequential. Not the acts, but rather the intentions behind them appeared to give or deny them validity. Yet a different reading of the dismissal of these visits might cast it less in relation to gestures of exchange, but simply as the Iranian style of undermining one's good acts in words, a gesture of humility.

A third possibility is that by way of undermining her visits to the grave of her martyred cousin, she attempted to distance herself from him, and thereby from the state and its hyper-memorialization of the martyrs. Considering the recent predominantly disillusioned atmosphere with official martyrdom, and the fact that Freshteh and I were casually veiled, this last option was rendered more plausible. None of these assumptions nevertheless would necessarily exclude the possibility of coexistence and interplay with the others.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ It reminds me of another occasion when having come to the funeral of my uncle's wife, who passed away during my fieldwork, we were given a ride by a cousin of mine and my mother reminded us that having come with her, we should visit her mother's grave. The visits to graves are, in this sense, more about social relationships with the living than paying heed to the dead.

²⁹⁹ Our outfit presented us as non-supporters of the regime for while casual veiling in and of itself does not generalize the entire spectrum of the feelings and reactions towards the Islamic Republic, nor towards Islam, in situations like the one described here, of two women with a camera interviewing people, the representation of one's stance towards the state takes a more significant physicality and theatricality, manifested also in veiling as one of the seminal indexes of the devotion, not so much to Islam but to the Islamic state.

“His children don’t have time to come here.” It was not clear to me whether it was regret or sarcasm underlying her words. Her remarks left it unclear whether she believed that his children’s failure to visit their father’s grave was inevitable because of their hectic lives and demanding professions or their affliction with the “prevalent materialistic attitude which has been recently growing within the society at the cost of forgetting the values for which so many lives have been sacrificed.” She made these remarks without asserting a direct association between them and the children’s absence at their father’s grave. Time and again, I heard similar statements during my fieldwork in Iran from people who then admitted that they had themselves also been changed by materialistic interests. Yet I did not ask this woman about these issues. I did not ask, for instance, so do you think they have forsaken their father? I restrained myself to biographical questions. “So he had children? What about his wife?” She interrupted with a prompt response. “His wife is remarried. She no longer visits the cemetery. And his children, all his three children are now accomplished professionals. His oldest son is a well-known surgeon in Shiraz; the younger son and his only daughter are lawyers and reside in Tehran. They are too preoccupied with their work, and have no time to come to the cemetery.”

The sister was approaching us. She was now close enough for me to see the puzzlement emanating from her eyes, evidently wondering what we, two strange women with a camera, were doing on her brother’s grave. In a louder voice, as though to include the sister in the conversation and perhaps addressing my puzzled look, the cousin explained: “You know how busy people are these days! Life is so hard and everything is so different nowadays.” Her next statement seemed more transparent and yet still

pregnant with ambiguity. “Martyrs’ kids enter the best universities; they get the best education because of their martyred fathers. But then, what? They are often too busy to remember their fathers.”

Already on the grave, the sister greeted us, sat on the grave, and began pouring the water from a jar onto the plants and the flowers at the head of the grave. Greeting her back, Fereshteh’s camera and I watched her as she lovingly washed the gravestone with the palm of her hand and her fingertips, so amiably, as though caressing him. Clean and wet, the writing on the gravestone shone and became more visible. I suddenly found myself saying good-bye and began walking away. “You don’t want to talk with the sister?” Fereshteh asked me as we walked away. Two voices from within struggled to respond, of a former inmate, and of an anthropologist; the result was a weak, hasty and strange tone, reaching out from somewhere deeper than my throat, and coming out of my dry mouth: “let’s go to talk to other families.”

Reflection (a section of *my field journal*): On the way back home, with our ways diverging, Fereshteh and I said good-bye and took the train in opposite directions. Now, traveling with strangers, the image of my walking away from the grave was replayed in my mind. Even the manner in which I had walked away appeared as an indication of my emotional ambivalence. I had begun to move as if I were running away, but then, as though someone had pulled me back, I slowed down. Guilt, the Nietzschean consciousness, had pleaded with me to stay, while a stronger sense of survival, the “economy of expenditure” of emotional affect, a deep sense of disconcertment, had pushed me forward, to escape.

Like a flash, the image of Benjamin's angel of history had passed through my mind.³⁰⁰ As with the angel of history, my face was also turned towards the past (back), but instead of a storm from paradise, or the future, it was the memories of the past that had irresistibly propelled me "forward." To the present and to the possibility of a more sensitive future I had turned my back and left, a naked reality which somehow deep down I knew, perhaps even then. In that moment, I had failed to overcome the challenges of facing the pain of this revolutionary guard's sister, while imagining those civilians in Kurdistan being killed by veterans like him. I had felt incapacitated to reconcile my sympathy for the grief and pain of the sister for her brother's death with the images of the beaten bodies of friends, with the awakened pain in my own body. The bodies of all of those killed and martyred were now rotten in their graves, but the pain that was inflicted on the surviving body of the individuals and the body-politic was still achingly fresh.

Living in Eternity

What was more frightening and agonizing about this experience was my realization that, on the grave of this martyr, I had imagined him in a manner similar to the way that the Islamic Regime treated its opponents. I had perceived him as a faceless, bodiless, embodiment of a Single Enemy. This was a man about whom I assumed to know so much and yet knew so little. All I knew about "him"--as a person--amounted to few biographical details which I gathered from his gravestone and from his cousin.

However, as a depersonalized, revolutionary guard who had fought and died in

³⁰⁰ "His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (Benjamin, 1968: 259).

Kurdistan, I could write a book about “him.” In his grave, and in history, as in the frame of his photograph, he had remained frozen in a never-changing moment of his living and death. Stagnant, with no chance of reflection, disillusionment, and transformation, he was deprived of dying, for he had to live for the state as an exemplary martyr; for the dissidents, he was always a horrifying revolutionary guard. The chance to change and feel despair belonged to the survivors on either side.

Dead, and thus living statically in time and forever, he could not become one of the now corrupt *pāsdārs* (revolutionary guards) who live on bribery and by confiscating drugs which would then be sold on the black market, a routine everyday practice in Iran today. Neither would he be among those left out in poor neighborhoods, suffering from their war injuries, growing more disillusioned everyday about their sacrifices and the direction the revolution has taken. Nor would one encounter him, along with so many others, in one’s visit to Razi mental hospital, as a patient so over-medicated that he can no longer walk, cursing Khomeini or claiming to be Mahdi, the Imam of the age. Of course, for the surviving dissidents, he cannot be envisioned as having become like Akbar Ganji, a former revolutionary guard, and a member of the Islamic Republic’s Secret Police, who is now the most outspoken dissident of the state and has spent six years in jail. No, this “*pāsdār*” is dead and thus lives lifelessly forever.

It was this morbid notion of death and eternity that led me to imagine him as the embodiment of all the cruelty toward the resistance movement, just as for the regime and these revolutionary guards we exemplified the incarnation of all Yazidis of all times. Suddenly, right there and then, at the site and the sight of his death, I had come once more to realize how difficult it was to cope not merely with the epistemological,

discursive and practical complexities of my project, but with its hegemonic interpellation and its emotional intricacies. The great challenge for me, and for the subjects of this project, was to separate a single face from all those apparently similar ones, to unfamiliarize that which seems so familiar, to reckon with each face and body separately, to remember the dead, not merely those chosen ones as official martyrs, but those who have been deprived even of graves. This is a constant challenge for the surviving families of both groups of martyrs and for the society at large whose body is scarred by violence.

Cemeteries and Picnics: Competing with the City of the Living

Having left the grave of the revolutionary guard and walked not so far away from it, I am emotionally exhausted and suggest a break for coffee, which Fereshteh and I purchase from the only coffee shop in the cemetery, predictably located in this section. As we sit on one of the many tastefully painted green benches and sip our coffee, an incredibly pleasant fragrance draws our attention to the flowers behind us. We are surrounded by the delightfully beautiful and lavishly green scenery: tall trees, colorful flowers, fresh green grass, blue running streams, ponds, and fountains. From nearby, the laughter and screams of excited children can be heard. Holding hands, young couples come and go; passing us by, they leave behind the smell of their perfumes, bits and pieces of their conversations, and the tone of their voices.

If one ignores the graves, the ambiance resembles that of the parks in the northern parts of Tehran, where the air is less polluted in comparison with the densely populated poor neighborhoods of the southern part of the city. In the refuge of the shade of the trees, delighted by the smell of colorful flowers, dozing off under the caressing fingers of

the breeze, one could have perhaps easily forgotten all about death and destruction; even the craziness of life in the city could have been turned into a memory from a vaguely remembered past.

Strolling around, Fereshteh and I come across groups of families, who have spread their blankets on the grass, are eating, drinking, and chatting. The inviting tea pots on their samovars, and the tempting aroma of delicious Persian food emitting from the pots on the picnic cooking plates, creates a sense of a typical outing in Iran. In the playground, children scream as swings take them to the heart of the blue sky; here and there, one sees men resting with their head on their woman partners' laps;³⁰¹ the lovers' whispers are heard, as they stroll around, sit on the benches, or relax on the grass. These common scenes of a picnic lead one to wonder if people have in fact become oblivious to the reality of this place as a cemetery, that they have forsaken all those perished lives that are buried here. Is it possible to confuse this cemetery with a park, one might wonder? Perhaps one could have, if,...But many do not! Many cannot!

It is hard to forget, not merely because the moment one walks into any of the sections, one comes face to face with the graves and the mourners. It is not so much that one frequently comes across the sight of elderly mothers' curses and tears, as they carry tins of water to the graves of their children. And not so much that one sees people still crying on the graves of their martyred loved ones more than twenty years after their death. For it is neither laughter nor crying which distinguishes this place from parks; rather the chilling contrast between a very lively and pleasant ambiance and the

³⁰¹ It reminds me of the observation and remark of a former woman inmate, and wife of a dissident martyr, Shirin. "Is this not interesting that any outdoor experience for men is about eating, and lying down? No matter how old they are, men seem to always remain kids when it comes to needing women's care and attention."

disconcerting smiles and gazes of those dead young men, captured and frozen in their photographs.

Confusion between visits to the cemetery and a normal picnic day could have occurred, if the lives of the dead individuals had not been signified by the often absurdly similar words on the gravestones, if their laughter had not been caught and framed in their photos; if their entire lives had not been compressed in those minute boxes, their new houses, indexing their absence from their “real” homes. Forgetting would have been possible, perhaps, had it not been for these crude metallic houses with bizarre objects within them, and those gazes staring through the cages, the frames of numerous photographs. The reality of Behshtzahra and its “Flower Garden of Martyrs” cannot be forgotten for reasons not limited to, but significantly including, the writings on the boards everywhere in the cemetery which constantly remind one of her indebtedness to the martyrs. Frequently one comes across the monuments of martyrdom and war. For if not the “loyal mourners,” then the objects in this “Flower Garden of Martyrs,” delineate it as the site of death and as the first and final destin-y-ation of war and violence.³⁰²

Thus here in this Flower Garden of Martyrs, the State Martyrs’ burial ground, the instant one’s eyes focuses on the graves, the laughter of the children turns ghostly. The grinning teeth of death, embodied in the metallic and glassy miniature “houses,” shine through trees and bushes. As in Freud’s “On Transience” (1959),³⁰³ one is instantly jolted out of the peaceful beauty of nature and romance into the violence of war, and its

³⁰² One might see similar sites of picnicking in regular cemeteries. Yet, as I mentioned, a constellation of factors distinguishes this section of the cemetery, as the site of violence, from an ordinary burial ground, of which the characteristics of martyrs’ graves, the monuments, and writings on the boards are few examples.

³⁰³ Freud, Sigmund. “On Transience” in *Collected papers*. Trans. James Strachey Vol. V New York: Basic Books, Inc.

aftermath. But it is not merely the sight of death that reminds one of violence and war. Their marks come to the surface even when one is invited to share Āsh Reshteh (Persian noodle soup) and watermelon with a group of mothers of martyrs. One hears the stories of lives and deaths of their loved ones, and the lives they have created in their absence.

In the midst of eating and sharing news of weddings and births, bizarrely, the heavy shadow of death swathes everything. One hears of the story of a fifteen-year-old woman who married her eighteen year old cousin. Immediately after the wedding, the groom leaves for the front. Soon he returns, but no longer on his feet, but rather in a bag that holds the pieces of his body, a name tag, and a torn uniform. Twenty years later, the bride, who is now a lawyer, is still a widow.

New Life in the Ruins

But Beheshtzahra teaches more about death, violence, and the multifarious ways of coping with them than perhaps any school ever could. It demonstrates the creative ways in which people build their future out of ruins; it presents one with the manifestations of new lives and relationships flourishing and regularly encountered in Beheshtzahra. An example of these new relationships and communities built on the sites of death was that of the four mothers who welcomed Fereshteh and me into their company. As we greeted them while walking by, these four mothers simply invited us to join them in “having āsh reshteh, (noodle soup) and hendevāneh (watermelon).” We sat around a tablecloth spread on the graves around which these four mothers were eating and chatting. No introduction seemed necessary for them to share their stories, laughter, grievances, and food with us.

“We come here every week,” one of the mothers said. Her words were picked up by another mother: “We have been coming here since our sons were martyred.” A third one added: “If you come on Thursdays, you’ll find us here. We are often here for the entire day; sometimes we cook here, but other times, like today, we bring our food, and heat it here. We bring fruits, sweets, and other stuff, and eat and chat together.” As they poured us tea, I informally asked about their stories which they related to me as generously as they offered their food. They commented about one another’s lives, interfered with and completed each other’s stories, and filled in the gaps born of forgetfulness or perhaps difficulty in articulation. This manner of interconnection between their own and the others’ stories and emotions, and the great knowledge of details about each other’s lives revealed the extent of intimacy between them.

“How long have you been friends? Did you know each other before the War?” I asked. “No! We met each other here, on the graves of our sons. We live so far away from one another and have such different lives. See, for example, she lives in Karadj, while I come from Hasan Ābad,” a mother whose worn black chador, and coarse hands, and deeply wrinkled face, were indicative of her working class background, responded, while the woman in a long manto and “maghneh” (a particular kind of head cover), pointing to a woman in a flowery black chador, added, “the two of us live in Tehran, but the four of us do a lot together beside coming here. We plan to go to Jamkarān, or take trips to holy Mashhad, or Qom.” The woman from Karadj, interjected: “We consult one another about our problems, marriages, and...” As the conversation continued, they kept interrupting and completing each other, so much so that in the end, I could not tell exactly which one said what; but from all this I inferred that their friendship was a by-product of

their martyred sons' new houses neighboring one another. The dead were as actively involved, in this geography of friendship, as the living. As in the cities of the living in which war has created new neighbors, neighborhoods, and friendships, the cities of the dead have also engendered their own new neighborhoods and friendships, sometimes crossing the boundaries of class and social position as a result of shared grief. This reality in the cemetery cannot be forgotten.

Yet, it would be an enormous error to suggest that there could be a single impression of Beheshtzahra, for everyone and on every visit. As with entering a large city, where one's experience would greatly depend on one's point of entry and initial encounters--the impression of the ambiance of an upper class neighborhood, for instance, would remarkably differ from that of shanty houses--here as well, various visits might be impregnated with significantly different, even surprising, outcomes. For there are far more histories buried in Beheshzahra than what lies in the "Flower Garden of Martyrs."

Beheshtzahra also contains the stories and bodies of many suicides, heart attacks, and strokes that have occurred in direct or indirect reactions to this violent history of war and political suppression in Iran. These stories have often been pushed into an enduring invisibility at the margins of the cemeteries and of history. Not on state television but also on the graves of the three martyrs killed in the Iran-Iraq War, one could hear of the story of their mother who set herself on fire after losing even her husband to a stroke. These deaths also remain outside of the pages of the official history. Yet they are still buried within the normal social settings, with regular funerary rituals and mourning processions.

The dead of dissident martyrs, however, are allowed neither into the mainstream cemeteries nor the pages of the official history. Rather, they exist and live as secretive, underground hi-stories in invisible pages of an unwritten history and in the unmarked, and sometimes non-existent, graves. Not every visit to the cemetery would expose this destitute landscape; nor would reading the dominant history of the cemetery reveal this hidden reality. Only occasionally, a random day tour, a losing of one's way, or an intentional search, might lead to these vexing sites of political violence in post-revolutionary Iran. Of such a site, Section 33, which Fereshteh and I came across, is one manifestation.

Transition: Images of Words and Words of Images

My experience on the grave of the revolutionary guard of which the earlier pages provided an account was colored by the initial encounter with a different landscape upon entering the cemetery. Despite our intention to visit the "Flower Garden of Martyrs," in fact we did not visit it until the end of our day tour of the cemetery. As Fereshteh and I arrived at the cemetery early on that Friday, after a long ride on the subway and then the bus, and as though missing the forest for the trees in our over-attentiveness to details around us, we somehow passed by the "Flower Garden of Martyrs" section. To turn this loss into an opportunity and to "get a sense of the entirety of the cemetery," I suggested that we take a tour around. An uncanny, accidental turn of events led us to a totally distinct site which shadowed our experience of the day.

As we rode on, Fereshteh, for whom this visit was the first in a few years, expressed amazement at the size, rapid growth, and the "beautiful" and well-maintained quality of the cemetery. The bus passed through the perfectly paved wide boulevards

along which were blue painted brooks in which the water shone under the sun's rays. Starving for the fresh air which is so scarce in the city, I gulped down the air with a bizarre sense of stealing it from its "original" residents. The remarks I had heard about the "ābad"(developed) status of this cemetery, versus the stark deprivation and gloomy condition of life in the city, were racing through my mind.

"No wonder Khomeini chose Behshtzahra as his first destination when he returned [to Iran], guiding Iranians and their revolution to the cemetery," Marziyeh had said. Deeply scarred by violence and losses, Marzieh's version of the recent history of Iran was perhaps understandably cynical. A former inmate under the Shah, and the widow of a leftist dissident, she raised two children as a single mother with great difficulty. Now her children are in their early and mid twenties. Her large extended family experienced so many losses in the War and the political suppression that "for years since 1980, nobody in [her] family could stop wearing black, for before the mourning period ended for one loved one, another one was killed."

As the bus passed by a huge board bearing a large photograph which showed Khomeini surrounded by a dense crowd at Behshtzahra on the first day of his arrival in Iran, the image of Marzieh's family in black merged in my mind with that of the people in the photo. We passed by section after section in the cemetery, as Marzieh's words resurfaced from my memory to accompany the writings on the boards and the photos, like a tour guide who gives information about each scene appearing before the tourist. "Isn't it really ironic that in his first speech in Beheshtzahra, Khomeini accused the Shah of turning the country into ruins while developing its cemeteries (gabrestonāsho ābād

kard)? Who could have believed that so shortly after, he himself would transform the entire country into a cemetery?”

The images and voices of present and past converged in Fereshteh’s exclamation, “Oh, my god, how gigantic, this is a real city.” Marzieh’s voice continuously narrated the story of the sights, cutting through Fereshteh’s words, as a tour guide’s voice would interrupt a conversation between tourists. “When Khomeini returned, this cemetery was incomparably smaller, with one- story graves. Now if you go to Behshtzahra,” she had advised me, “you will see new sections added almost on a weekly basis; the graves are now two or even three stories high. Now the dead lie on top of one another. Even that does not suffice; the sections over thirty years old are being uprooted to create space for the new dead, and they are using this as an excuse to erase the sections in which our martyrs are buried.” As if conversing with Fereshteh, in my mind Marzieh went on to say: “Behshtzahra will soon win the competition with the city over the density of their populations; as the apartment buildings in the city grow higher and every day more people live on top of one another, in Behshtzahra, as well, the dead now lie on top of each other.”

Exaggerated as it sounds, Marzieh’s description seems to manifest itself, and be repeated by many other people, in the reality of Behshtzahra. “Instead of providing jobs, and housing for the youngsters, the leaders led them to their graves. See, the cemeteries are not exclusively for the dead,” she had suggested. She explained further: “Nowadays where else could the poor afford to take their children for an outing?” In fact my several visits would confirm the multipurpose quality of this cemetery, as a site to pay homage to the dead, perform pilgrimage, picnic, socialize, and initiate new lives through marriages

in the graveyards. It has turned into the very embodiment of “ham fāl-o-ham tamāshā (an omen and sightseeing).³⁰⁴

Affirming his mother’s comments, Marzieh’s son, Damāvand, had taken up the cynicism typical of the political culture of contemporary Iran. Utilizing the terms used by the state, he suggested: “This is in keeping with the state’s promise to provide the “mostazafin” (deprived, financially oppressed), with resources; if the poor can’t afford to go to pilgrimage to Mecca, or even Mashhad, the state accommodates them by delineating their visits to the graves of the martyrs, or Khomeini’s tomb, as pilgrimage.³⁰⁵ They can now ask for blessing or healing, no longer necessarily from saints in faraway shrines, but from Khomeini’ shrine, or from the martyrs.” The sarcastic remarks of Ferdous, a former inmate, also the widow of a leftist dissident and a single mother with two children, joined in my mind with those of Marzieh and her son, though from a separate conversation. “No wonder Khalkhālī declared that the state’s opponents are crazy if they really believe that the Islamic Republic would act as stupidly as the Shah, to leave a country behind for its opponents. If this regime is to collapse, we will turn the entire country into ruins, into a cemetery. They have already begun the process of destruction.”

As we rode on the bus, passing by the pond, streams, and sprinklers, I recalled the red dyed pond, in those years of the Iran-Iraq War. From the center of that pond, the red

³⁰⁴ “Ham fāl ham tamāshā” is a Persian proverb which is used to imply the simultaneous double results of one’s action. In this specific case, for example, by taking the children to the cemetery one gains the blessing of God, and the pleasing of the dead, as well as offering the children a day of fun and outing.

¹⁵ Interestingly, in my visit to Shalamche’s museum of war, I was struck by the fact that at the entrance a sign welcomes the people who have come for pilgrimage and on the way out which wishes that their pilgrimage be accepted by God. Also, visits to Khomeini’s tomb have the ambiance and explicit attributes of a pilgrimage. Hundreds of people come long ways by buses or private cars, some even on foot, to spend a few days there. They set up their tents in the courtyard. They are given free meals, and visit the “shrine” regularly, while their children play in the courtyard, as in some pilgrimage sites.

water spilled over, symbolizing the blood of the martyrs pouring down for the “holy war.” The Holy War was now called the “Holy Defense,” and the bloody water was no more. In its stead stood a blue pond, a culturally symbolic signifier of peace, heaven, and honesty.

Section 33: The Name of the Nameless

Somewhat lost in the size and the unexpected pleasure of the ride in this cemetery,³⁰⁶ Fereshteh and I finally decided to get off the bus. Our gazes were still on the tall old trees as we got off. Yet the instant we turned our heads to look to the other side, only a couple of feet apart from one of the “regular” sections, suddenly (and “unintentionally?”) we found ourselves by a disorderly brick and mud wall that circumscribed a barren site. Too short to conceal what lay within or behind its boundaries, it segregated this section from the rest of the cemetery. Its uniqueness to Beheshtzahra’s landscape and its worn out look urged one to wonder what kind of life and death it meant to isolate, if not conceal.

The drastic distinction between this barren dirt site and the beautiful trees and well-maintained condition of the other section epitomized the realities of the marginalization of the dissident martyrs vis-à-vis the hyper-memorialization of the state martyrs. It was as though the tall trees of the other side were to humiliate and evoke the envy of the dwarfish and dry bushes in the opposite section. This sight of an absolute

³⁰⁶ The unsettling sense of pleasure does not simply arise from the nature of this place in which one is expected to feel sadness, rather than pleasure; it has also to do with a belief with which most Iranians of my age and older have grown up. Repeatedly expressed by adults this idea was carved in our childhood minds that “too much laughter would always lead to crying.” Regardless of the many different situations in which this saying was applied, the general sense it left on the psyche was to always be wary of grief, even in the midst of the most joyous moments.

absence of planted flowers, trees, and water, still visible from behind a distasteful segregating wall, arrested one's attention.

This was by no means my first coming to this site. Regardless, each time felt like the shock of an uncanny encounter with an unexpected, though unconsciously anticipated, scene. Like a traumatic experience, every coming across it felt as though a first time. It invoked its unique and yet familiar repetitive emotional intensity. Momentarily, in fact, I seemed to have forgotten all about it. Yet with the violence of recent political history steeped in Iranians' unconscious, the anticipation of coming face to face with this graveyard was as much "present" in my mind as it is for those who might consciously try to remain oblivious to it and even try to forget, as we know of the poetics and politics of memory. Thus, for Iranians, such sights almost always engender the shock of something at once strange and yet familiar; something that is already expected and is yet always out of place.

Vicente Rafael writes about this "hopelessly out of place" quality of the dead in discussing the "numerous photographs of Filipinos killed in a battle" during the Filipino-American War of 1899-1902, in *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (2000: 87). If in regard to the Filipinos killed in battle, the "hopelessly out of place quality" emerges from having transformed the corpses into "living images of the dead," in Roland Barthes's words of which Rafael remind us, in the barren graveyard of the Iranian dissidents Rafal's provocative question "what sort of sociality could exist that did not have a place for the dead" (2000: 91) is even more compelling. If in the case of the Filipinos that Rafael discusses, the living images of the corpses "resist the closure of mourning", and render the emergence of "the dead who live on, eluding mourning and

memorialization”(pp.91-92); in the case of the Iranian dissident martyrs, the battle is to allow the dead to die by bringing them to sociality and thus rendering the impossible operation a possibility.

Like photos of Filipino corpses, and even though the names, locations, or sizes of these Iranian dissident burials might differ, their resemblances in impoverished, barren features weave them together, as sites of the corpses of the contaminating, dangerous other that still lives on. Here there is a segregating wall, and a hardly visible, fading postmark which stands on a small metal pole outside the graveyard reads “ghateh-e- 33” (Section 33), speaking of a public secrecy concerning those lives and deaths that are to be erased from memories, histories, and cemeteries, as well as of struggles against such an erasure.

In this battle against the erasure of memories and thereby the possibility of mourning which, according to Derrida, “always follows a trauma”(1994: 97), the families of executed dissidents seek to move beyond trauma, by trying to transform it into, to use Nicholas Rand’s term “introjection.”³⁰⁷ Against all the obstacles, they, like younger Javel in the story “At Sea” that Rand retells, refuse to mourn mutely, and instead await “the opportunity to adjust to [their] loss through a public display of grief”(1994: 10). This possibility would require, as Rand suggests “to find and renew ourselves,...be able to remember the past, recall what was taken from us, understand and grieve over what we have lost to trauma”(1994: 11). This is the challenge that the Iranian families of martyrs of both groups face, though in different qualities and degrees.

³⁰⁷ Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’s concept of introjection, according to Rand, “appears to be a synthetic enlargement of abreaction, binding, working out, working-through, and the work of mourning”(1994: 7).

Section 33

Section 33 is the “name” of this flat, mostly unmarked, this landscape of bare dirt; one of the several graveyards in which lie the bodies of dissidents. Although some of the opponents of the Islamic Republic executed in the early years after the Revolution are also buried here, this section is particularly “home” for those dissidents of the Shah’s Regime who were killed under torture, in street confrontations with the SAVAK, or by execution. As the war reshaped Behshtzahra, both quantitatively and qualitatively, political suppression within national boundaries also required innovations in burying the dead of the dissidents. As early as the beginning of 1981, the state had already begun to place the houses of the dead in a hierarchy, according to their religious and ideological status, and the degrees of their proximity to the Islamic Republic.

The segregation of the dead had its own hierarchy: from the most significant ones, the martyrs of the state with their own internal hierarchy, then the ordinary dead and their layers of stratification, and on to the distinctions among dissidents which led some of them to make it to this cemetery. Those dead people considered too contaminating to be buried alongside Muslims, including those from religious minorities and most leftist dissidents, have separate cemeteries. Within Beheshtzahra, there are other sites, for instance, sections 91, 92, and 93, which are allocated for the dissidents of the Islamic Republic, often for the Mojāhedin, an Islamic opposition group.

Now we were in section 33, searching for the names of the dead amid the smashed gravestones with fragments of writings on the scattered pieces of stones. Once in a while we recognized a name. Images gradually reemerged in my mind, invoking the unsettling emotions of a previously lived anxiety and distress; stirred up, they began

rushing to the surface. We exhumed our reminiscences of those once-living women and men who were now trapped in their no-bodies in this derelict graveyard. Like the collector, who tries simultaneously to recollect the significance behind each item she has preserved as she guides others through them and their stories, we excavated our memories of those who were now “present,” and “represented,” in these broken tombstones, in these shattered names and fragmented identities.

Yet most of those dead had no traces, or even less “elaborate” marks than those with fragments of names or broken gravestones. Nothing seemed to be illustrative of these deaths. In the absence of a grave, signifier, or symbolic manifestation, death was rendered absolute. So absolute that, like Death itself, it appeared incommensurable. There existed no proof of its happening; rather it attested to an absence. It was less like the death of a once-living person, than of a never-existing non-existence.

It is against this utter disappearance that the families must locate the graves of their dead ones. As if reading ancient maps in search of treasures, they search step by step, taking, for instance, “three steps to the right from the southeast corner, then five steps to the north, and finally two steps to the left.” The more the regime dislocates the graves by erasing their signs, the more the families turn into walkers, in De Certeau’s notion of walking, by creating their own itineraries. That was how we, Fereshteh and I, were guided by a woman to find the grave of a former inmate. Of this urge to localize and locate the dead as a way of mourning, Derrida writes:

First of all mourning...It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by localizing the dead (all ontologization, all semanticization—philosophical, hermeneutical, or psychological—finds itself caught up in this work of mourning but, as such, it does not yet think it; we are posing here the

question of the specter, to the specter, ...One has to know. *One has to know it. One has to have knowledge.* Now, to know is to know who and where, to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies—for it must stay in its place. In a safe place...Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one *has to know* who is buried where—and *it is necessary* (to know—to make certain) that, in what remains of him, *he remain there* (1994: 90).

The freshness of the flowers on the graves speaks for the living who still remember the dead and make certain that “he remains there.” In an eerie sense, one comes to realize that one’s recognition of death is mainly reliant on the signs that index life; as though it is the material objects of this world that imply the dead being dead and “being” in the Other world. Simultaneously, though, these material objects, these indicators of one’s death, also and perhaps more crucially allude to a once-upon-a time existence. It is one’s very existence that is undermined or utterly denied in a traceless death. In the absence of visitors, mourners, graves, tombstones, and/or heirs, nothing remains to verify that one ever lived. This is a death that not only fails to beckon its opposite, life, but also is itself disclaimed. This sheer disappearance, not a disappearance *per se* but rather a never-appearance, is what the families of the dissident martyrs must face. Against this peril they have continued visiting the graves even at the cost of being beaten and arrested, responses which routinely occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s and have recently begun again.

It is this nightmare that haunts the families of those executed dissidents, day after day, year after year. Against this total disavowal of life of their loved ones, and in reaction to the frightening possibility of such a death, the families of neglected martyrs continue “obsessively” to hold on to their photos, letters, and/or any other objects,

indicators and reminders of the person who is no more. It is due to this concern that these mothers persistently come to the cemetery and express worries about their own death.

“Who will come to his grave when I die?” wondered apprehensively one elderly mother whom we met on this graveyard. This is an anxiety not about their own deaths, but that the end of their lives would mean the absence of an indication of the death, and thus life, of their loved ones. This is a double death, a double negative, of death and its non-recognition, death and its erasure, a forsaken life, a never existence, an utter death, an absolute nothingness, an unimaginable absurd void.

In this already-forgotten departure is also forgotten the ever-arrival: a death whose precondition, life, is not remembered. Here is the insight forced upon us, against all our previous presumptions: death, in and of itself, is never as absolute as we claim, not as long as the living keep the dead alive in material objects and retellings of stories, and in their own lives, not even when the ghosts return. The relation between life and death is more inseparable and intertwined than we often construe. Death is total only when the dead are dead to the living. For as Buck-Morss suggests:

Survival implies death, the death of an other, or others, a death which also speaks to us and yet, leaves us to outlive it, thus turning us into witnesses. If birth, as Benjamin writes “is a ‘natural’ condition,” death undoubtedly, “is a ‘social’ one”³⁰⁸ (quoted in Buck-Morss, 1999: 101).

It is this recognition of the sociality of death that lies at the heart of all the battles over the invisibility and hyper-visibility of the dead between the state and the families of

³⁰⁸ In fact, I would suggest that in reality even birth is no longer natural. We do not even need to list evidences of all the different ways that pregnancy is induced. All the techniques and means of making birth a cultural and historically specific phenomenon are far too clear to require to be noted here. The reality is that there is no longer anything to which we can simply refer as natural. Our nature is already cultured.

martyrs. The issue here is not merely about the fact that, in Derrida's words, "all people do not die in the same way" and that rather "one dies a cultural death"³⁰⁹ (1993: 43). It is not even merely about, though relevant to, the dramatic distinction between that which Derrida, borrowing from Heidegger, calls "properly dying" and "perishing." For even life that "fades away at the end of a long period of old age," to which Bichet refers as "natural death," and that which "puts an almost complete end to animal life long before organic life ends," are themselves sociocultural phenomena, constantly subjected to change in their specific contexts (quoted in Agamben, 1999: 153). It is not merely the question of the untimeliness of death that disturbs, though families articulated over and over the fact of untimely and unjust deaths. In other words, it is not merely the "physical" perishing, but rather the social perishing, the vanishing of the dead from the social world, that presents itself as the most haunting possibility, particularly for the families of the dissident martyrs.

This was the impression I received from the struggles of the dissident and even state martyrs' families, more than any political agenda. The complaints and worries of most families about the youth not paying heed to their dead, I would suggest, was mainly derived from the anxiety that the dead had died to their children. The dead die all over again in the death of the mother or other family members, in being forgotten by the youths, or in being erased from history. It is in facing such an impossible abyss that the revolutionary generation implores the attention of the youth, fights to enter the pages of history, and strives to offer a counter-narrative to it.

³⁰⁹ This statement might appear somewhat simplifying the complicated concept of dying. For, "dying is neither entirely natural (biological) nor cultural. And the question of limits articulated here is also the question of borders between cultures, languages, countries, nations, and religions, as well as that of the limit between a universal (although non-natural) structure and a differential (non-natural but cultural structure)," writes Derrida (1993: 42).

Journal, July 31, 2004

I have come to see the sisters of the three executed Rashidi brothers, in their home. The family is very well-known among the dissidents. Their mother, a highly respected and active “mother of martyrs,” as she was usually referred to by the families of the executed dissidents, has passed away about five months ago. Her death has brought a great sadness and anxiety to the “community of the executed,” regarding their relationship to their “martyrs,” and to one another. As I ring the bell, and right before Zohreh, one of the sisters, with whom I have come to talk, opens the door, my eye catches the funeral announcement on the door, it has still not been removed five months after the mother’s death.

The content of the announcement instantly introduces me to the peculiarity of what I am to encounter. The expression of sadness for the mother’s death in this poetic prose is less about her loss to her living children than her loss to her martyred sons. It conveys the concern of her family that “she would no longer be around to commemorate their loved ones,” and concludes that “this burden, the task of commemorating and keeping their memories alive, is now on our [the sisters’], shoulders.” The life of the mother, the announcement implies, was condensed and concentrated on one goal, to live so that her sons would be remembered, would live on in their deaths. Her death is a reminder, and generates the anxiety about the sons’ utter death.³¹⁰

³¹⁰ To the question of gender and its relation to mourning I will attend in a different chapter.

Whose Monument?

Mrs. Rashidi, a mother of three executed sons, three “Rashids,” (tall standing men), as their sister, Zohreh, refers to them, was an embodiment and a manifestation, an exemplary motherly figure whose whole existence rotated around her devotion to her sons’ lives, and later to the preservation of their memory after their deaths. Since the arrest of her sons during the Shah’s regime, Mother Rashidi had played a significantly crucial role in organizing and participating in all the activities against dissidents’ imprisonment, torture, and execution. Her efforts in establishing a community of the families of political prisoners had proven vital and effective. Her presence appeared imperative at all gatherings, be it in the graveyards, at anniversaries or at home, or in coming together in front of the jail to protest the maltreatment of dissidents’ children in jail. On all these occasions, her presence was expected.

She was one great example of those mothers to whom I refer as “loyal mourners.” I define loyal mourners as those mourners, often mothers, for whom mourning becomes a significant aspect of their identity. Without their mourning, they will no longer be who they are. The mourner mother stands, like a monument, to the memory of her dead son or daughter. Her life is turned into an object for the remembrance of the life and death of the dead.

For the Rashidi family, the monument itself is now gone; in its stead remains a hollow space, a void, which is to be filled in by other monuments built as though on its ruin. The anxiety is immense, the burden unbearable. Those who are to take on the role of the new replacement monuments wonder: will they effectively represent the great task the mother had so efficiently undertaken? What would their failure mean? What of their

own deaths? Who would take over their place? What is it that enables one to inherit the position of mourner? The most frightening question haunts them all: what of a time of no replacement?

As I am sitting there and listening to Zohreh's stories and concerns, and her sister's worries about Zohreh's chain smoking and ill health, suddenly a shiver runs down my spine. The realization collapses on me, like an avalanche, a revelation from which no escape seems possible. Am I not here, at Zohreh's home and privy to all the stories, so that I can take on the role of a substitute? Am I not perceived to participate in some way in forming another monument? Here I am, the anthropologist, the one who is to bring the dying and decaying voice back to history, to rescue that which appears at risk of extinction, and to relieve the survivors from the huge burden on their shoulders? Am I, as the anthropologist, capable of carrying this burden? Am I competent to do justice to that with which I have been entrusted?

Zohreh smokes and incessantly narrates the stories of the lives, the struggles, and the deaths. Tears wash her face, while the smoke of her cigarettes and her frequent coughs punctuate my senses, my sight and my hearing. As she relates detailed accounts of mourning processions, anniversaries, cemetery ceremonies, the risks and troubles of the surviving families in undertaking this forbidden grieving and mourning, of their constant surveillance, arrests, and beatings, I scrutinize the room, like an archaeologist searching for artifacts to trace in order to make sense of the past.

The living room I enter is illustrative of the presence of all the dead in the lives of the living. The walls are covered by the photos of three young and handsome men, with dried roses decorating the frames. There are also photos of the father and the mother.

The mother's smile has frozen and is hung on the wall, with her eyes staring at her sons' photos. The handicrafts which the sons had made in prison, and their letters sent from there, are also hanging on the walls, as are the embroideries, paintings, poems and other related objects offered by others in the memories of the three "martyred comrades." The cemetery has come home. The home has turned into a cemetery, and a museum. On one of the walls, a poem of Shamloo commemorated those who "stand face to face with thunder, illuminate the house, and die" (from my field notes, July 31, 2004).

Where is the line between life and death? How is it that we have assumed such impassable boundaries between the two while they appear to be so categorically inseparable? What does it mean to think of death as a natural state, of a "non-existence," or a "being in an other world," when the whole idea behind this Other world is a social perception born in, limited to and shaped by language? What does death mean, beyond our understanding of it as a social phenomenon, regardless of our assumption that casts it as a "natural" entity? We are born to our life, as well as to our death, socially, culturally, politically, and linguistically, through and through. It is within this bounded context that we cope with our lives and deaths, resisting the kind of death that erases us from our sociocultural and historical existence, throwing death back to its sheer meaning outside of society, outside of language, to its "natural form," to impossibility. Against this impossibility Mother Rohāni, the mother of an executed dissident, insisted that her son had the right to die and be mourned as any other human being, as "a social being" (yek ensān-e-ejtema'e). It is for this recognition of humanity that these families strive to reclaim a social and historical death for their dead loved ones. This is an assertion of death that reclaims it within and in relation to social existence.

It was in this light that, standing on that barren site, in Behshtzahra Cemetery, in the disheveled houses of the dead dissidents who as socialists had, ironically, lived and mainly died for those living in shanty houses, that my friend and I attempted to decipher the great significance of the material objects carried to and left on these graves by the living. Paradoxically, their neighbors in this section of the cemetery were orphans and the homeless poor, buried without tombstones and without families to visit them. These neighbors were left without anyone to remember that they had ever lived. For the dissident families, the smashed stones and the objects left on the graves were thus not merely the indicators and affirmations of the death of their loved ones, but of their once-lived lives, struggles, dreams, and unfulfilled desires, that had been so utterly erased from the pages of mainstream history.

Hence, here at this vital site, on this battleground for claiming a counter history, every piece of a tombstone appeared as a valuable treasure. We walked around and loudly read the fragmented carved words on the pieces of the shattered tombstones, searching for traces, for signs. My friend filmed what we saw, perhaps, as a way of preserving the decaying indicators, of these lives. I tried to put the letters together: here a word “āghāz” (beginning) with the date of birth, and there a “parvāz” (flight and the date of death) had survived the cruelty of destruction. I strove to envision the unfulfilled dreams behind these fragmented words and letters, as I am now trying through these scattered pieces to weave together stories in search of new horizons and venues where the living, in Derrida’s words, might converse and learn from ghosts rather than exorcising them.

“How could they do this? Not even giving a break to our dead ones? I feel sick to my stomach; my head is about to explode,” Fereshteh expressed her agitation and anger again and again in these and similar terms. To console her and certainly also myself, I suggested: “You know, if the dissident’s graveyard was not as remarkably distinctive from the rest of the cemetery, the regime would have perhaps succeeded in erasing it from people’s minds. This place would never have been noticed, or known about, had it not been for its unique, gloomy character. The reason you and I, as well as many others spot this place is exactly because of its wrecked appearance.” Now as I write, I wonder if one’s writing could mime and yet disrupt the boundaries and uneven venues that the official discourse of martyrdom has allocated for the martyrs and their surviving families, so that they both come to find their personal and particular ways of grieving and coming to terms with the death of their loved ones. But more importantly, I wonder about the kind of translation of history and perception of life and death that would allow the dead to die their social death, that would enable the living to live their lives no longer for the sake of death, but in response to, and as a responsibility for, the sociality of life and death. My writing remains to wonder and to seek ways for such a translation and production.

PART II

Chapter 5

From one Mountain to Another: The Dance of the Peak

On a beautifully sunny day, Payām, an executed dissident's son, and I waited in a long line along with many mostly young couples to ride in a cable car on Mount Touchāl, which is the second highest mountain in Tehran. Almost all of the youngsters were dressed stylishly and had trendy hats and sun glasses on. Most women wore heavy make up and many of them had high heels on. In fact, I had to keep myself from staring at a woman whose appearance was much more fitting for an evening party than the mountains, or so I thought. The short loose *manto* and little scarf that she wore drew more attention to her evening gown and dyed and stylishly made-up hair. Eating snacks, drinking sodas and juices, along with loud laughter, flirtation, and the harmonious movement of bodies, which revealed the music that was inaudible due to headphones, created a lively ambiance distinct from that which was floating in my memory. Among these cheerful, fashionable Iranian youth, I felt somewhat out of place, like an outsider, not merely because I was a generation older than most of them, but also because of my passé appearance. As though seeking a space of belonging, my mind took me back to the time in my past when I was as young as these people around me and hiked the mountains with others like me.

The people with whom I hiked the mountains in the late 1970s were left-leaning dissidents against the Shah's regime. However, the possibility of SAVAK infiltrating the group prevented open and direct political discussions among the hikers, except in very small circles of friends. Nor was there any clear declaration of one's ideological inclination. The performing and performative quality of every act and gesture was thus

highlighted. From organizing to hiking, the entire activity was employed as the language and the metaphor through which the revolutionary views and values of the “group”³¹¹ were subtly communicated. Performance was as much a language as a substitution for it.

The whole “program”³¹² functioned as the training and recruiting stage for revolutionary activists under the disguise of mountain hiking. At once performing and performative, mountain hiking in some ways resembled the religious reenactment of the Karbala event known as “*shabih khāni*,” which allowed the realization of performative resistance under its protection by portraying itself as a mere performance-reenactment. Let us recall that *shabih khāni*, as the reenactment of a religious event, had to constantly operate within preset boundaries of bounded resemblance. It remained in danger of getting too close to the real, and yet faced the reality of its inevitable transgress. *Shabih khāni* had to perform a double talk, speaking of resistance for its oppressed audience while appearing for the people of power as a “traditional,” innocuous religious drama.

Similarly, mountain hiking was to work in measured, calculated and precise limits of resemblance to and distance from political activism. It was to be a stage for rehearsing political activism against the Shah, and yet appear to the regime as mere physical activity of youth. It too had to offer a double talk, a double performance, to the dissident organizations and the youngsters as potential revolutionaries, on the one hand,

³¹¹ These mountain hiking groups were not really constituted of a solid membership. In fact there was no real membership or procedure for entering or leaving these groups. To survive clashes with the Regime, most of these groups were formed as college students’ extra curricular activities. They were thus open for the agents of the secret police to infiltrate as students. On occasions when an undesirable person entered the group, there was no way of expelling the person unless there was a serious infraction against the rules of hiking; otherwise the person had to be forced out by making the experience intolerable. The creative ways of expelling different unwanted people was a “public secret” within the group.

³¹² Casual mountain climbers simply would talk about it as going to the mountain (*kouh raftan*), but the more serious mountain hikers, who were mainly dissidents of the Shah’s Regime referred to it as a “mountain hiking program” (*barnāmeḥ-ye-kouhnavardi*). “Program” (*barnāmeḥ*) was meant to also insinuate the organized quality of this activity.

and to the watchful eye of the state, on the other. The precision in these performing acts was imperative and required great artistic skill. For the elusive state and its invisible secret police, SAVAK, for which technologies of rumor offered even greater omnipresence, hiking had to present itself as a legal activity within the very system that utilized such endeavors as reinforcement for its claim to modernity.

Even more precision was necessary in regard to the underground revolutionary recruiters, whose invisible presence was no less mystifying than the presence of SAVAK, or God's invisible omnipresence. Nobody knew the real face of the main recruiters, or the SAVAK, and yet one constantly assumed that they were present through their intermediaries. Nobody could publicly claim "mediumship" for the recruiters, for as with the revelation of God to the Prophet, the communication could never occur publicly. The relationship between the main recruiter and the "medium" had to remain both invisible to the public eye and yet trustworthy. But as with the ever-present danger of fake claims to connection with Gods, there were members of SAVAK who disguised themselves as intermediaries of the revolutionary recruiters. Each hiker who desired to be "chosen" had to offer herself or himself as a spectacle, aware of being constantly watched both by Satan and by God, by SAVAK and the revolutionary recruiters.

One thus was to act as a double and ambivalent signifier, simultaneously obscure and visible, opaque yet communicative, transparent but mystified, sanctified while transgressive. One was not to appear too openly as a dissident. As God does not appreciate piety to show itself off—the term "‘ābed namā" in Persian literature is abundantly employed to refer to those individuals who use piety as a means of gaining prestige and material or social advantages—the revolutionary recruiters did not trust a

person whose dissidence was too exhibitionistic. Such a person could be either perceived as a naïve, careless person who did not recognize the grave danger of the Satanic forces in society, namely the secret police agents, or was himself or herself an agent of SAVAK, disguised as intermediary between the invisible recruiters and the potential revolutionaries. A tricky double duty was demanded from these leftist dissidents, as has been required from pious Muslims. They were to at once offer themselves as a guiding model to be imitated by others and yet be introverted believers whose connection to God, or revolutionary organizations or ideas, remained a private matter between the two parties.³¹³

Yet as Saba Mahmmod (2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006) elaborate, acts of piety are performative and formed not merely in believing but also in the public demonstration and practice of those beliefs. The line between exhibition and communication is too fine to easily separate the two, and one has to constantly rely on one's intuition to trust one is on the right side. As in religious devotion, where trusting the fake guide leads one to hell, with revolutionary activism as well as a mistaken connection could lead one to the earthly hell of the Shah's regime, possibly even to death. It was thus essential for the hikers to at once represent themselves as activists and role models of political activism and also as safe players. Like *shabih khāni*, this safety was also ambiguous, for what was considered safe for the regime differed from what seemed safe for the recruiters.

³¹³ This used to be even more the case for Shi'i Iranians under the Shah, and before, for those among whom the religious act was considered more virtuous when hidden from the eye of the public. Imam Ali's late night cries to the well and his disguised and secretive visits and charity offerings to the houses of the poor and the orphans are legendary stories for Iranian Muslims.

Numerous overlaps existed, as they do in religious and satanic devotions. While the dissident nature of the hiking trips had to be guarded from the “non-intimate” (*nā mahram*) eyes of the SAVAK, they still had to open themselves up to the invisible authority that was to determine their worthiness. In the meantime, the hikers had at once to reveal and conceal themselves from the “ordinary” individuals who could be potential future dissidents, future believers, but were not yet proven trustworthy followers. The hikers in this sense were the mediums of the mediums; one might venture to say that they symbolized the Khomeini of the leftists, though were deprived of his singularity.

A great similitude between religious and political relations of authority and submission is apparent. As in religious submission, here too one had to trust the invisible authority by reading ambivalent signs, by the leap of faith, while remaining cognizant of the perilous possibility of being led to Satan—to SAVAK. It was not rare, in fact, that the one who claimed to be the agent of God, the revolutionary recruiter, worked for Satan-SAVAK and led one to the hellish torture of its prison. Adorno and Horkheimer’s remarks about modernity that assume everything invisible and unknown to be a source of terror and turns terror mysteriously into the sacred are relevant here. As with nearly everything else under the Shah’s Regime, the mystifying and ambivalent language, symbols, and metaphors of hiking on the mountains rehearsed, communicated, and performed that which direct words and behavior could not.

This chapter will explore two interconnected terrains. On the first plane, questions of submission, authority and their relationship to human senses will be tackled through ethnographic accounts, by visiting their embodiments in pre-and post-revolutionary Iran. I will focus mainly on the left and the Islamic groups, with the

shadow of the state stretching over both of them. I will argue that notwithstanding all the differences between them, they share many similar notions and orientations that are rooted in their being and constructing themselves in a modern world and bearing a particular relation to power and knowledge. One exemplary manifestation of these shared values might be traced in the way the revolutionary generation, of both leftist and Islamic backgrounds, complain about the new generation's loss of value. On the second terrain, I want to problematize the binary oppositional debate about whether or not modernity is the era of nomos or logocentrism; in other words I intend to challenge the simplifying views that either privilege writing over seeing or vice versa. I suggest that, in the aftermath of language, the seeing of the eye is itself informed and influenced by language and is shot through with it. It sees within the limits of the horizon that language has opened up.

A particularly pertinent issue here has to do with the way in which collective memory and metaphors have been manipulated and appropriated by different groups in modern Iran. Despite their stark differences, this shared source of capital has generated greater commonalities between the left, the religious and the youth in Iran than has been acknowledged. I will attempt to elucidate these similarities mainly through fragmented episodes. These fragments will be woven together by the same theme that binds this chapter. A few more words about the rules of conduct of mountain hiking under the Shah may show a way into these fragmented episodes.

The Boundaries of Propriety and Identification

As a leftist hiker, one's outfit and social manners were to set one apart from the "religious," "traditional," and "trendy" looking youth. Class and, to some extent, even

gender distinctions were to be erased among the hikers. Instead a “surreal” appearance of belonging to the “proletariat” was to be refashioned. We might recall Mr. Akbari’s insight that, to refashion the nation, the Islamic Republic expected of Iranians not a general adherence but a particular reading of Islam. In this shaping of the self as a proletariat, too, it was not a generic notion of the working class, but a context-specific and historically particular class-conscious Marxist proletariat that was demanded and pursued. Khomeini’s attempt to claim originality and authenticity inevitably resulted in a simultaneous transgression from, and an excessive mimesis of, “original Islam.” Similarly, here, an unconventional and exaggerated model of working class mannerisms was prescribed. The boundaries of normalcy of the leftist subject were no less restrictive than those of the Islamic Republic in creating ideal Muslim-citizens.

Even the smallest failure in appearing “proper” in accordance with these unwritten codes of conduct could make one fall outside of the particular community and be stigmatized as an outsider. One’s continuous task was to amend oneself and others for this ideal subjectivity. Yet the notion of construction of subjects was always already intertwined with, and necessitated, sacrifice of the self and the others. As with every sacrifice, here too, embodied practices and delicate disciplinary procedures were essential. It would not be too far fetched to construe these techniques of subject-making among dissidents of the Shah as analogous with those of the Islamic Republic. In religious discourse, these techniques are called “commanding to good deeds and prohibiting the wrong” (*amr-e-be m`arouf va nahy az monkar*) and “struggle against the self” (*Jahād-e-bā nafs*). Similarly, most leftists utilized Mao’s command in “criticizing others and criticizing oneself,” (*enteghād va enteghād az khod*) from his thesis, “Against

Liberalism,” albeit in “Iranian style,” not so much as a replacement or complement to religious ethics as their “secular” reinterpretation.

Deviance was treated with such stigmatization that its subjects either left the group or adopted its often non-verbally communicated rules. This technique of embarrassing or alienating the unfit person was also deployed after the Revolution, where everyone was expected to be alike, like a single body that was multiplied in millions. Yet, like the Islamic Republic that did not limit itself to reinforcing its rules by mere conformity or leaving the community, the more prominently deviant subjects could also become the subject of harsh criticism by other members. In rare cases, even some penalizing acts were undertaken, though they were often indirect.

But in 2004, as I stood in the line waiting for the cable car with Payām, my eyes moved on and around these young fashionable lovers and friends, wondering if the leisurely atmosphere was an illustration of the loss of values and memories among the youth about which the older generation constantly complained. I suggest that these seemingly unrelated situations, namely the construction of revolutionary subjectivity among the leftists under the Shah, the refashioning of the subjects-citizens by and under the Islamic Republic, and the apparently unbounded behavior of the youth, are not separated by rigid walls and are in fact all outgrowths of society.

It might appear self-evident that these two apparently radically incongruous views, with their seemingly oppositional positioning on the side of religion or atheism, would inevitably engender different subjectivities and divergent “kind[s] of authority” (Rose 1998). While this might to some extent be true, I will argue that firstly, despite their differences, the collective memory from which they both draw and in relationship to

which they have grown, induce more commonalities than differences concerning their basic notions of authority, submission, and subjectivity. Secondly, as products and producers of a particular context characterized by modernity, albeit in its singular mode, as Dabashi suggests, “Shi’ism (as in fact Islam in general) *ipso facto* exposed its medieval doctrinal roots to the corrosive elements of the Enlightenment and Modernity” (Dabashi, 2000: 511), no less than the Marxism which also emerged under these productive as well as corrosive conditions.

While both the illusive ideas and practices of absolute submission to God and the Kantian notion of the autonomous self might appear epistemologically and philosophically contradictory and unbridgeable, I want to argue for their closer bio-ecological outgrowth. Thus, while I also recognize the divergent “modes of being” that these Iranian subjects “seek to achieve” (Mahmood 2005), I want to emphasize the shared soil and water which allows them to grow or die away. I want to shed light on the significance of the fact that these modes of being, granting their variety, still speak, mainly, with a shared language and metaphor. The question of their more successful dissemination, as I argued in the first chapter, has mainly to do with how aptly they innovate and yet are still able to resonate within the familiar notions and memories of the public to which they are addressed.

Both dissident organizations under the Shah and the Islamic Republic demanded the individual’s submission to the rules of “propriety” for their approval by an authoritative power and for their sense of belonging to a certain community. In both cases, in order to create a pure subject and community, sacrifice and annihilation of the self or others, which meant being either the other in oneself or outside, were imperative.

I will later return to the question of whether the “children of Revolution” have set themselves free from such a relationship to authority, submission, and sacrifice. Suffice it to say here that, despite rupture and discontinuities, these notions continue to live on, albeit in new forms and concepts, even among the youth. Since these ruptures and continuities within and between generations beg the exploration of their relationship to collective memory, my aim in this chapter is to complicate notions of remembrance and forgetting as well. I will trace the intricate and diverse manifestations of remembrance and memory within and between generations, and in their differing relationship to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, with regard to questions of authority, submission, and sacrifice.

Riding with Memories

As the cable car moved up the mountain, the sound of the cables reminded me of Kafka’s strange creature, Odradek, who laughed “without lungs” (1961: 161). Although my eyes hurt, I could not take them off the snowy mountain that shimmered under the sunrays, like carpets of silver or diamond. While sitting comfortably in our little car which steadily carried us higher into the heart of the bright blue sky, Payām and I looked down on the hikers, who from that height appeared like dwarves, walking up at an absurdly slow pace. Tall and athletic, in his chic and expensive sun glasses and black and white sweater, with his deep-dark hair and penetrating large black eyes, Payām looked more like a Hollywood movie star than the son of an executed leftist raised by a single mother, who was herself a former inmate.

As my eyes voyaged through the colorful appearances of these youngsters, I recalled how for us, as dissidents of the Shah in the ’70s, worn-out clothes were meant to

symbolize preoccupation with more serious matters of life and death and our disinterest in materialistic concerns. The unwritten rule about our mountain boots prohibited brand-name or expensive boots, but emphasized their reliability, which signaled one's dedication and serious relationship to mountain hiking. One was to draw a clear line between oneself and those for whom mountain hiking was mere fun or a hobby, and from those who undertook it as professional athletics. For us, mountain hiking was rather a means of "constructing one's self" (*khod sāzi*). A certain look and behavior were vital to the fashioning and representation of this "self-model."

Lines of propriety were clearly drawn and guarded. We avoided hiking the easy common paths on which "ordinary" fun-loving people hiked. We called these paths "mules' paths" (*jāddeh mālro*), which implied that these people were as ignorant about social and political situation as mules.³¹⁴ We ridiculed the all dressed-up middle class individuals whom we did not even grant the title of hikers, instead spoke of them as those who came to the mountain. We called them "*sosools*" (the fragile looking or somewhat spoiled-brat individuals)—interestingly, in the early years after the Revolution, those who attacked leftists' demonstrations chanted: "Spoiled brats do not clap; your bracelets will be broken"³¹⁵ (*sosoolā dast nazanin; alangohātoon mishaneh*)." We even teased the Westerners who got naked and jumped into the river while drunk, or at least we assumed they were drunk.

³¹⁴ It was also called mules' path because they were easy enough for the mules to ride on.

³¹⁵ This phrase also conveyed the very concept of mismatch. The leftists, according to this chant were participating in an act that required serious tough looking people while they supposedly appeared fashionable, wearing bracelets. The reality was in fact not about their look here, for they neither had bracelets nor looked fragile. The issue was to isolate the left and to eliminate the act of clapping along with chanting which the left had made it common in demonstrations, and which the Islamic Republic had deemed non-Islamic. Interestingly however, in recent women and students protests against the regime clapping has been resumed.

The borders on the other side were to distinguish us from the professional hikers for whom mountain hiking, in our view, was an act for the sake of the act. We perceived their approach as equally absurd as that of artists whom we despised, whose work of art was for art's sake. We advocated "committed art,"³¹⁶ whose goal was to contribute to working toward a just society, and argued that for us mountain hiking was not merely about reaching the peak, but also about how we get there and what we learn and teach others in the process. We also made sure to represent ourselves differently from the religious dissident hikers. Yet, even though we did not fast, and neither did the women among us cover our hair, similarities between us and the religious hikers often outweighed our differences. The closer the political tactics and views, the more the hikers of both groups resembled one another. The more severely the group pursued the goal of "physical self-construction" (*khod sāzi-e-fiziki*), which was common among those with the tendency toward militant organizations, "cheirk hā" on the left, and "Mojāhedin" a religious group, the less food and water was carried and the more rigid were the mores of gender and sexuality.

But there I was again in 2004. Our car was smoothly moving up the mountains as I spoke with Payām about the mountains of those late 70s. I told him how strange was this experience of reaching up the mountains not on my own feet, but via technological machinery. I explained to him how we, the activists under the Shah, conceived of mountain hiking as a means of training ourselves for hardship and the difficult conditions of prison, torture, and death that seemed inevitable and imminent in our lives. But, as we moved higher up on the mountains, my mind began drifting from Payām and my

³¹⁶ See Karmran Tallatof (2000) for his detailed discussion of these two views of art.

surroundings. It took its own journey to the past, not in complete detachment from its outside but in juxtaposition to it. In fact, rather than a “one way street,” like the cables that carried some of us up while others were coming down, my mind swung, between past and present, if not in quite such an orderly way as the cable cars. It was as if the ride was offering me the possibility of traveling in the times and spaces of the recent history of Iran to make sense of its changes and continuities, especially in regard to the two generations, the youngsters of the revolutionary era and contemporary youngsters, of which Payām and I seemed as embodiments. To these times and spaces I invite you, the reader, to travel along with me.

Peak Dance

It was 1979, only a couple of months before the Revolution. I was hiking up the mountain with one of my friends, Fakhri, and a large group of hikers. Taking every step forward in that snowy mountain entailed struggling to pull our feet out of the snow, only to sink in it above our knees in the next step. As if in a silent movie--for Fakhri's voice was lost to my memory while her complaints were present in my head, though I do not know how one hears words without the voice that utters them, I heard her say: “For the last five hours you have been telling me that we have half an hour to go.” Even now I vividly see her frowning face and hear her usual sweet nagging tone which had led us to bestow on her the nickname, “*sosyāl ghorghoro*” (the nagging socialist).³¹⁷ In my mind's eyes, she was tightly holding on to my arm as she breathlessly dragged herself along and pulled me even deeper in the snow. Like trying to fool a two year old child, I assured her

³¹⁷ Remembering this nickname brought to the surface other memories and images of a group of several friends, who named each other by a two-part nickname, all beginning with socialist, with its second part of which was taken from what we thought to be the particular characteristics of each of us. These varied from “sleepy,” to “nagging,” “chubby” and so on.

that this time I was telling the truth and showed her the peak which had appeared again and seemed so close. I said to her, "See how close we are. The peak is totally within our sight now." Going for another handful of snow, she murmured, "Even the peak is playing a trick on us. It comes to view one minute only to disappear a minute after."

From earlier experiences, I knew that she was at the stage where my encouraging methods no longer worked. And I still preferred them to those which aimed at compelling the hiker to walk by evocatively ridiculing and humiliating her. It was a common friendly practice for those in the middle of the long line of hikers teasingly to sing: "Oh those in front go slower; the ones in the back have fallen apart (*borideh*)."³¹⁸ This phrase was to imply that those who had fallen behind (physically or emotionally fallen apart, or politically pacified or broken) and could no longer keep up with the rest of the hikers. The hikers in front would respond in the same ridiculing tone: "Oh those in the back, no longer come to hiking program."³¹⁹ The game had already been played and

³¹⁸ The significance of the word "borideh" was less about its mockery of one's physical strength than of the ideological and emotional one. The term was used about those who could not stand torture and would give in to the interrogators or become passive even before getting arrested. This was the main negative connotation of the term for the dissidents.

³¹⁹ Even though this whole exchange was a playful gesture, expressed in a spirit of friendly scorning, it had important ramifications and therefore significant effects. The word "borideh" in this mocking song that accused those walking in the end of the line of "boridan," which literally means having been cut off from others because of one's weakness, had a very sound political resonance with most hikers. In a particular political language of Iran, specifically in the 1960s and 1970s, "borideh" referred to the former political activists who had become pacified and no longer belong to the dissident groups. In the context of political prison, which was a fairly common destiny for activism in Iran, it referred to activists whose soul was broken under torture or-and imprisonment. The dominant view perceived enduring extreme hardship, especially of torture and imprisonment, as a capacity of the trained and constructed self that is solid both physically and, in the vocabulary of the leftists, ideologically (the term which is now been often replaced by emotionally, or spiritually.) This idea of strength was not so much about machismo as about physical and emotional endurance that was seen necessary for dissident activism. Mountain hiking for these activists was not a mere sport or a hobby but rather a means of, and a model for, practicing, training, and being trained for a militant organized activism. In this sense, from the beginning to the end, a mountain hiking experience was carefully planned as if a semi-blueprint and a ground for organizing and recruiting activists. Organization was thus as important as was the hiker's position in line, which was very much determined by the "masoul-e-barnāme," the person who was responsible for carrying out the program. He or she, though more commonly a he, would decide who was the "jolodār," the first person in line who was to be alert to what lay ahead, pace the walking, and remain attentive to the pace of the group. In large

had its temporary effect, but now Fakhri, for whom this was her first hiking program in six months since she fell and broke her leg, was too tired and in pain. She was getting increasingly agitated.

In the mountain of 2004, my eyes were captured by the beauty of the blue sky, but a strange sense of mistrust in the precision of the machinery in Iran began tickling me inside. I asked Payām if he had ever imagined the possibility of a technical problem while so high up. “Oh, who cares,” he responded. “Our everyday life is not so much better than that possibility.” I wondered how often I had heard such phrases during my stay in Iran and from so many different people. I was not sure how seriously and literally I should take such remarks. But my mind’s eyes had retreated back to 1979 and stared at the snow of the mountain we hiked.

I was myself struggling my way up the sharp incline as Fakhri complained that she could no longer walk. I asked her to sing along with me and began singing an Azeri song, which was popular among the mountain hiking dissidents. Everyone joined and sang along, including Fakhri. This lifted our spirit and gave us the energy we desperately needed for the last sharpest steep before reaching the peak. It was, however, hard to simultaneously sing and walk up the high incline. Voices were fading and barely heard.

groups, there was a middle position, which belonged to the person who was supposed to make sure that the connection between those in the front and those in the back in line was not broken. The person in the back, “*aghabdār*” was the one who walked as the last person in line and made sure nobody fell behind or out of line. The guide, “*rāhnamā*” was the person who knew the direction well and often was an experienced person in mountain hiking so that he or she could make wise decisions in indecisive moments of finding out directions, under possibly unusual circumstances. While these positions were not rigidly chosen and changed, they could in fact vary from one program to another. During a program, however, they were often rigidly implemented and followed. Each of these positions had their own characteristics; the one in front was often an experienced hiker who could walk steadily and pace herself or himself with the average pace of the group, so not to slow down the group or walk too fast so the group could not keep up. The person in the back was to always make sure that he or she was the last person in line and that nobody had fallen behind and been separated from the group. The entire ambiance and the rules of conducts were configured as a model for participating in or leading an organized resistant movement.

Suddenly a loud voice from the middle of the line offered a boost to our singing. Loud cheers from those in front signaled that the peak had been reached. Breathless, exhausted, but jubilant, I set my first foot on the peak and dragged Fakhri along. The beauty of the peak and the joy of having reached it overtook me. Excitedly I told Fakhri: “We made it Fakhri; here we are, on the peak.” We held hands and made a circle to perform “the peak dance” (*raghs-e-gholllleh*) which basically meant that everyone in the circle jumped up and down in a Kurdish or Lori style of folk dance.

Fakhri, who had collapsed and let herself nearly fall on the snow, was still sitting. I was worried that on the way back during the “criticizing others and criticizing oneself session” (*jalaseh-ye-enteghād and enteghād az khod*), she would be the target of harsh criticism for not acting in an “appropriate mountain hiking manner” (*raftār-e-kohnavardāneh*).³²⁰ I approached Fakhri, and in a whisper asked her to get up and join us. “I can’t stand on my feet. My legs are shivering from exhaustion,” she said. “I know but how great it is that you made it all the way. I am sure you have a little energy left to enjoy this moment. Dancing the peak dance will really elevate your energy,” I told her, as I held her hand to help her stand up. She joined the circle, while still nagging in whisper, and no longer as seriously: “Why can’t we rest and dance a little later.”

I could have offered many reasons to assure her that this was the best thing to do, as I had myself been told before. I could have tried to convince her that if we rested with our sweaty bodies, they would cool down and we would freeze, especially since on our way back the sun would be fading. I could have even argued that the moment of reaching the peak was similar to a rite of passage for which a ritualistic celebration was necessary,

³²⁰ This manner of mountain hiking which encompassed several rules of one’s relation to oneself and to the group was in fact a translation of the leftist revolutionary mannerism.

and that the celebration would enhance our energy. But we both knew that the main reason was a demand on ourselves and others as political activists to achieve an ideal model of physical and “ideological” strength, a way of cultivating ourselves as revolutionary subjects and fitting members of the collective. I knew Fakhri’s desire and determination for political activism, but I was worried that “the façade of her behavior” (*raftār-e-zāheri*) could be misrepresenting her “inner self” (*bāten*).

Once again, I departed from the past, perhaps because of the singing that came from the nearby car on which a young couple was riding. I could not hear the words but the rhythm sounded like L.A.-style Iranian pop songs. Back in my memory, on the peak of the mountain, the group had started singing “the peak hymn” (*sorod-e-gholleh*), in a firm and loud tone: “Mountain hiker, be strong. Be victorious and live long. Like the adamant peaks, be firm in the face of events (disasters); go to mountains and deserts; refashion your soul and body and see the beautiful waterfall....”³²¹ Faces were proud and voices energetic. The program head announced that we should get ready for our return. Fakhri sounded desperate. “What? Return? Nonsense!” and after a pause she went on to say: “What’s the rush? Whose head we are carrying?”³²² As she poured her complaints on me, always in whisper, she was completely aware that I could or would do nothing about these rules.

Nobody really knew who decided on these rules. It was an almost secret code, like a divine law the origin of which was not easily approachable. One assumed that even if

³²¹ The song was longer and went on as “at nights while dancing around the fire till dawn, awaken the stories of the ancestors’ time.” It then goes on to repeat: “go to the mountain and desert; refashion your soul and body and see the beautiful waterfalls. The lyrics and the rhythm conveyed determination and strength. “Kohnavard mohkam bāsh! Pirooz-o-pāyandeh Bāsh! Chon Ghollhehā sarsakht, mohkam dar havādes bāsh....”

³²² This Iranian idiom implies that one has murdered someone whose head he or she is hurriedly carrying. It is used when people are hasty and nervous without a known reason.

one did not understand all its logic, somewhere up or down there, there were those who did; who would reward a performance by choosing one as a deserving person to be recruited, and perhaps even sacrificed. Fakhri and I both knew that she could only show this “unacceptably weak” side of hers to me, for we had been friends before becoming activists. Otherwise, as pioneer revolutionaries who were to construct and represent ourselves as unbending characters, imitating the mountains on which we climbed, such weaknesses were entirely inappropriate.

Rules of Proper Martyrdom

In the spring of 1981, once again and for the last time, Fakhri and I hiked on the mountains along with a large group of now declared leftists. It was a couple of months before the first wave of political suppression and the arrests and execution of dissidents by the Islamic Republic. The hike was no longer as tough and the hikers were much less serious about the rules of conduct of hiking. This time Fakhri was not nagging about the hike, but was rather anxious about the near future, and the possibility of torture under which she worried she might not be strong enough. She agonized that she would not be an ideal political prisoner for she thought she did not have a “decent voice” and or a good enough memory to remember the revolutionary songs’ lyrics. So how could she be able to portray herself as a resistant prisoner, she wondered. Worse yet, she lamented that she did not know how to write well and thus she would not be able to write a nice last will before her execution. “You have to help me,” her voice still repeats these words in my mind, again and again, as she said: “You have to help me.” She was asking me to write her a last will, arguing that it was no different from all those times I had helped her with

her composition in high school. I was to write her a last will which she would then memorize and whenever about to be executed, she would write it down from memory.

Only now do I feel that Fakhri's anxiety about her performance as a resistant dissident in jail was a reflection of her insecurity about her "inner strengths" (*ghodrat-e-daroni*), or what the left called ideological stability (*sobāt-e-idoulozhiki*) and the religious discourse referred to as "the strength of the self" (*ghodrat-e-nafs*) or "the inner faith" (*imān-e-bāteni*). I never wrote a last will for Fakhri, but we both knew that the last wills of those who had been executed earlier provided us with samples for they were published in dissidents' pamphlets or journals. They were often distributed by young leftists at the risk of getting caught and having to imitate these and leaving behind new samples of last wills of their own. In the fall of 1981, Fakhri and her husband, who had been newly married, were arrested. They were both executed in the winter of that same year.

No last will was given to their families but the story of Fakhri's endurance under torture and her firm reaction when summoned for execution became legendary for her fellow inmates. She turned into a model of resistance and an embodiment of selfless self-sacrifice. Later, her fellow inmates would tell me how her behavior at the time of leaving for her execution distinguished her as a "symbol of and a model for revolutionary resistance." Calm and firm, she walked in the ward from one room to another, joked and laughed with the inmates, and warmly bade farewell to them. Finally before leaving, she gave a fiery speech about the necessity of continuing to fight for social justice and for an ideal society.

Among our friends' circle, we used to call Fakhri "*sosyāl ghorghoro*" (nagging socialist). She was not a strong mountain hiker and did not remember the revolutionary

song's lyrics. But she did no nagging as she walked to her death. Today, as I write with the memory of my executed friend floating in my mind, I contemplate how her story at once confirms and challenges notions of performative subjectivity. At the core of this confirmation and challenge lie the distinction and the complex relationship between "the appearance-façade" (*zāher*) and "inner being" (*bāten*)³²³ that is deeply rooted in Iranians' language and discourses. From that contemplation, my mind momentarily stops in its journey in times and spaces, at one of those moments when I realize that in 1981, when Fakhri was executed, she and I were even younger than Payām today. Unlike 1979, in 2004 Payām and I arrived at our destination feeling no pain or exhaustion in our legs.

On the Trail

Once more I noticed the shimmering reflection of the sun that spread on the snowy mountains like carpets of diamond. I was still caught in memories of the past when, somewhat out of the blue, Payām asked me: "Auntie Shahla,³²⁴ why did your generation revolt against the Shah? Wasn't that regime much better than this one? Why do we have to live this shitty life because of your revolution?" This was not the first time that I had heard people, especially the youth, complaining about the revolution and blaming those who had participated in it. It always seemed so hard to explain to them that the revolution each one of us had imagined in our minds was very different from that which had come about. But then, if one suggested this, as most dissidents often did, the youth would victoriously announce, and rightly so, their discovery of yet more proof of the naiveté of their parents, the "revolutionary generation."

³²³ See William Beeman (1982) Roxanne Varzi (2006).

³²⁴ Addressing friends of their parents as auntie and uncle is not uncommon among Iranians but it has become even more common among the children of dissidents. After having their parents executed or in jail, friends often took the role of family members.

For the suggestion of a revolution that one imagines and that which is actualized is anchored in the illusion that there exists a possibility that one's imagination could be actualized, as if it were a design in the mind of an architecture that becomes materialized in a building,³²⁵ or as if the "inner self" (bāten) could be transparently represented as appearance (zāher), or that there was something outside of that which was represented. Mehdi Bazargan, a member of the first Islamic Parliament of Iran highlighted the discrepancy between his imagination and the reality of the revolution in his historically famous phrase: "we wanted rain but there came flood."³²⁶ This dreaming of something that turns out to be something so drastically different is inherent, at least partially, to the momentary unison of millions of incongruous dreams and desires submitting to one revolutionary authority.³²⁷

The dynamics and logics of condensing all these diversities in a single revolutionary leadership is analogous to the way mountain hikers suppressed their differences and discomforts for the sake of the desire to construct themselves as revolutionary subjects. Both situations required and entailed constant sacrifices and compromises of singular fantasies, and a never-achieved collective imaginary of an ideal

³²⁵ Even that building would not be perfectly identical to that which had appeared in the architect's mind.

³²⁶ This flood he dreaded was articulated in his last speech at the end of the first parliament: "Two days later the time of this first Islamic Parliament of which I was a member would be over and I would lose the parliament immunity privilege. From the day after tomorrow, I, like my constituencies, could be subjected to scrutiny, arrest and imprisonment. So, I am using this opportunity that the head of the parliament has given me to announce that if in later days if you witnessed that they have arrested me and then with great fuss and propaganda declared that I am being presented on T.V. to clarify some truths and if you saw that person said things that are different from what he said yesterday and today, and if he, like a parrot, repeated some things, be aware that that person is not Mehdi Bazargan" (cited in Peiknet.com in March 18, 2007).

³²⁷ The shock goes both ways, for those who gain the power and those whose sacrifices turn against them. It is this shock of which Khamene'ye in an interview with one of the newspapers, *Ettela'āt*, speaks. He admits that he was so shocked by the unexpected outcome of the revolution, the victory of the "Islamic Revolution," that he says: "You might not believe it but even for a while after February 1979, many times I wondered whether we were asleep or awake, and would try not to wake up for the fear that the dreams would go away" (Interviewed in February 1984).

society. For in Adorno and Horkheimer's words, "the whole as whole, the manifestation of its immanent reason, necessarily leads to the execution of the particular." More importantly, they go on to suggest that "[w]hat is done to all by the few, always occurs as the subjection of individuals by the many: social repression always exhibits the masks of repression by a collective" (2001: 22). In beckoning this illusion of a utopian paradise and the realities of its inevitable disenchantment, Kundera writes:

People like to say: Revolution is beautiful; it is only the terror arising from it which is evil. But this is not true. The evil is already present in the beautiful, hell is already contained in the dream of paradise and if we wish to understand the essence of hell we must examine the essence of paradise from which it originated" (1981: 234).

Defending one's dreams of revolution is rendered more complicated when one is dealing with a generation which has "come of age" in the aftermath of its already disenchanted stage, and what is more, at the age of theories about "the end of history" and the end of revolutions.³²⁸ This difficulty was doubled in my case for, even though I had lived through its most hellish years, I had later left Iran and lived in the U.S., while those who were not even born in 1979 had to live, in Payām's words, with its "shitty" consequences.³²⁹ While these "shitty" consequences are different things for different people, or even for the same people in different situations, just reading the following passage could hint at the kind of evil Iranians had to live through after, and in the midst of, the euphoria of the Revolution of 1979.

³²⁸ I am here alluding to the *"The End of History and the Last Man"* 1992, a book by Francis Fukuyama and also to scholars who argue that the Iranian Revolution is the last revolution.

³²⁹ It was therefore not that strange that sometimes people denied their participation in the revolution so widely that one wondered where those millions of marchers during the revolutionary uprisings had come from.

For Islam to blossom we can kill, if necessary, even at least a million people. I can make even Reagan—the President of the US at the time—a Muslim in a month. For Bani Sadr—the former President of the Islamic Republic who was expelled by Khomeini—one and a half months are needed³³⁰ (Asad-ullah Lajevardi, the former Tehran Revolution Persecutor and former chief of notorious Evin Prison, in Jomhuri-e-Islami Newspaper, March 1964, cited in Peiknet.com on March 18 2007).

That Lajevardi would turn even Reagan into a Muslim in a month, does not merely convey the threat of the cruelty of torture and its “miraculous” effect on “bending everyone,” as he so proudly suggested, but it also insinuates the performative techniques of constructing subjects which work along with and alongside torture. This insight is essential to understanding authority, submission, and their relation to the technologies of subject making, which is always already also about memory and forgetting. To submit to a new authority one has to at once remember and forget the other, always sacrifice one for the other.³³¹

The Poetics and Politics of Remembrance and Forgetting

“How fast the past is forgotten,” Ferdous had once said in one of those long evenings during which Payām and Poyesh, her son and daughter, were putting us on trial for our “naïve utopian ideas.” It deeply hurt Ferdous that her children would call her ideas naïve. She would try to convince them that they were too young and did not understand the complexity of her life experience but almost always they both suggested

³³⁰ These statements will not make sense unless one recognizes Lajevardi’s allusion to his infamous torturous penal system under which many dissidents were forced to collaborate with the Regime and claim they had become Muslims. Thus his claim that he would make even Regan and Bani Sadr Muslims is both his way of bragging about his power of coercion and his implicit suggestion that Bani Sadr was even further away from becoming a Muslim than Regan.

³³¹ This was manifested in Hafiz’s poem “the monster leaves for angel to arrive” which was employed by Iranians as revolutionary chant to imply the necessity of going the Shah’s regime and the arrival of Khomeini.

that she had gotten stuck in 1979 and did not realize that the age of revolutions had come to an end. That evening too, not so unlike others, Payām and Poyesh left the room when they got tired of the argument. Ferdous knew I had also lived many of her experiences, but it seemed as though she needed to hear herself remembering why we had done what we had:

Remember how suffocating the atmosphere was. Nobody dared to say a word about the Shah. They had made everyone suspicious of others. But what is really agonizing to me is that these kids don't even care to know about the past. They think that under the Shah we all lived happily ever after and revolted just for the fun of it. They don't bother to do anything if they don't see it as fun. Fun has become the Iranian youth's God. Just notice how my own kids never sit through an entire discussion. They don't care if it is rude or whatever. They leave the room as soon as they feel it is making them think seriously or that it is taking away the time from their fun. No matter how many times I tell them about poverty, shanty houses, and all that misery that existed under the Shah's nose, they don't seem to be moved by any of it. Nothing really moves the youth today unless it is about their own selfish needs.

In 1986, Ferdous had been released from jail only to realize that with two kids she had no job, no housing and no family support. She had begun working days and nights. She sewed sleepwear on contract with a shop and provided for her two young children, her son, Payām, and her daughter, Poyesh. In between her work, taking care of her children, and visiting her husband in jail until 1988, when he was executed during the massacre of political prisoners, life for Ferdous was like an intense course of permanent mountain hiking, the peak of which was out of sight. Over and over, she told me about the impossible task of providing her children with the best of everything. "I sent both of them to language classes, not only for the English that was common among many middle class families, but also to German and French classes. They have gotten music and

painting lessons, have gone to a very prestigious recreation center; both have had swimming lessons from early age; Poyesh has gone to dancing classes and Payām had a long period of expensive and luxurious fencing training.”³³²

The conversation normally came after or sometimes in the midst of the usual arguments between Ferdous and Payām, which was often either about Payām’s dissatisfaction with the financial condition of his life, or Ferdous’ frustration with Payām’s extravagant spending. Payām would express resentment that all his friends had cars, villas in the north of Iran, and an infinite amount of money to spend without having to work, while he worked and still had nothing. He would suggest that all this was his parents’ fault, for they had irresponsibly brought kids to this life and then selfishly chosen a life that ended in their father’s execution and was worsened by their mother’s naïve ideas about prosperity. They were “selfish and despotic,” Payām bitterly suggested, for they had made decisions for children who were not even born. Thus, every time Ferdous spoke, and she spoke frequently, about all she had done to build a good life for her family, and even take care of her schizophrenic elderly mother, I had the feeling that she was defending not only her revolutionary acts and values, but also herself and her husband.

Over and over, during 2003-2005, I sat in her modest but relatively nice apartment and listened to the story of her life. I was captured by all its variations in each telling, which in and of itself is another amazing story to which I cannot attend here.³³³ I

³³² She would always open a parenthesis to suggest that Poyesh did great in everything and that Payām was always the tricky one.

³³³ Ferdous was a great story teller, who could keep her audience on the edge even when she seemed to be repeating herself. Like every good story telling, as Benjamin suggests, what attracts the audience to her stories were not merely their content but the way her life experience was unfolded and taken new shape in each retelling.

remember how I felt as though I were listening to one of those dramatic movies with a miraculous happy ending. But there was nothing in her life story like those movies where things suddenly turn upside-down and everything falls into place; nor was its ending that happy, or even really an ending. It was not only the “end of the story” about which Ferdous and her children were conflicted, but also about the remembrance or forgetting of the past.

Lewis Coser cites the Hungarian writer, Gyorgy Konrad, who writes of the politics of this difference of interest in remembrance and forgetting in his home country: “Today only the dissidents conserve the sentiment of continuity. The others must eliminate remembrances; they cannot permit themselves to keep the memory...Most people have an interest in losing memory” (1992: 366-7).³³⁴ Yet, this “interest in losing memory” is a selective one. The question of who tries to remember and who remains amnesiac is directly related to that of what gets to be either remembered or lost.

While Payām did not like to become privy to stories about oppressive regime of the Shah, the Revolution, or political activism and the crushing of dissidents afterwards, he sought out those anecdotes or images that highlighted the “socially free youth” and the modern façade of the Shah’s regime.³³⁵ These conflicts were, of course, not so much

³³⁴ From a philosophical perspective Derrida, on the other hand questions the im-possibility of desiring to forget in relation to mourning. He writes: “How does one desire forgetting? How does one desire not to keep? How does one desire mourning (assuming that to mourn, to work at mourning does not amount to keeping—and here we touch on what remains no doubt the unavoidable problem of mourning, of the relation between gift and grief, between what should be non-work, the non-work of the gift, and the work of mourning” (1992: 36)?

³³⁵ This however does not mean that his own memories and ideas are not conflicted, or his desire to forget some memories of the past not often contradicted by their urging force to resurface. While Payām refuses to go to Khāvarān Cemetery to “visit” his father in his unknown mass grave, his daily experience is overwhelmed by his anger about the absence of the father. In later chapters, we will see how these contradictory emotions find ways of expressions in a new language of the Iranian youth, especially in jokes.

about the past as about the present. Ferdous and her children's divergent interests in particular memories were derived from their different views of life, happiness, and sense of identity. For, as Gillis points out, "[i]dentities and memories are highly selective," and serve "particular interests and ideological positions" (1996:4). This means that the politics and poetics of memory are always already intertwined with questions of power. Kundera suggests that the "struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting"(1981: 3). But if power is perceived, in Foucault's sense of the term, as inseparable from knowledge, and as a dispersed and all-permeating phenomenon, then the struggle of human beings against power would be not only against imposed forgetting, but also for forgetting against a forced remembrance. Despite Benjamin's warning that what is not remembered will be lost to history, memory is constantly lost and found, reconfigured and renewed. The forgotten returns as if it were remembered anew, and what was once remembered slips away yet again. Memory and forgetting are themselves recreated and redefined.

To decipher the contradictions and varieties of these relations to the past, which are always about the present, one needs to look into the specific positionality of each individual and social group, and their relation to power. This understanding necessitates a deep ethnographic translation of particular realities. I, for instance, wonder how I would have felt about Ferdous' stories³³⁶ had I not heard them in so many different versions, while each time new aspects came to the surface. How my perception of her life would have varied had I not heard them at her place, where I met and became friends with her children, witnessing their constant disagreement and strong connection. How

³³⁶ I use plural in talking about her life story, not merely because there are so many aspects of one's lives and different stories of each but that the stories that one tells as one's life are never identical stories.

differently I would have translated the story of her life if she did not have to narrate her stories under the shadow of our now shared knowledge that she and her children, especially her son, did not see eye to eye, not even on her accomplishments as a parent.

An even more piercing question was how my understanding of these “generational values” would have differed had I concentrated only on the “types” of families of which Ferdous and her children were, if not representative, then somewhat exemplary. What would have been my sense of these relationships, I wondered, had I not encountered those families of dissidents like Sādegh and his mother, who had lived such a different life that in their eyes the lifestyle of Ferdous and her children seemed like high luxury. Payām and Sādegh and Poyesh all belonged to the same generation, the “children of the Revolution.” All three were born to leftist couples, lost their fathers to execution, either before or soon after they were born, and were raised by single mothers. Yet Sādegh and his mother lived a financially impoverished life in a town with strong “traditional” family values. Only a couple of years ago, they had moved to a poor suburb near Tehran where they both worked. Sādegh could never afford to pay for classes to prepare for the national university exam, and thus never entered college. Payām had graduated from a private university just a year ago and Poyesh was a college student. They and their mother had lived all their lives in Tehran. These differences were illustrated in their radically different views and attitudes towards their lives and many basic issues. The binary opposition between “inner” (bāten) and “outer” (zāher) is not about their differences as much as it is about the power dynamics and the question of authority to which one voluntarily or coercively submits. The issue is not so much about the appearance that does not represent the “inner reality.” There are rather so many

layers and elements to one's being, and one attains and performs one's subjectivities in such a variety of ways that, for instance, my one-time conversation with Ferdous would have offered a totally encrypted translation of her. Factoring in elements of class, gender, and so on is necessary, though always insufficient, attempt at offering a more accurate translation of different subjects, their views and values.

Sādegh, for example, spoke of his father with great respect and felt the burden of carrying his name. In response to my question of whether or not he would be more at ease in occasions when his connection to his father was unknown, he unhesitatingly said yes, and added that as his son he feels compelled to act "properly." His relationship to his mother was no less different. Unlike Payām who was angry at his mother for not being able to provide better, Sādegh seemed to feel guilty for not providing enough for his mother. In Sādegh's view, after the father's demise it was his role as the man of the family to take care of his mother. However, while Payām and Poyesh encouraged their mother to date or remarry, Sādegh saw it as his mother's responsibility to remain loyal to her martyred husband.

His refusal was in fact a serious problem for Monireh, his mother, who had become a widow when she was only twenty two years old and was an exceptionally attractive woman, which makes the life of widowhood in Iran particularly hard, especially in provincial areas such as hers. She asked me to try to convince her son that he was old enough to soon be married and that the mother would like to have her own life. In our lengthy conversations about this issue, Sādegh seemed to be rather unwavering in accepting the idea of a new man in her mother's life. His "solution" was to make living with his mother a condition for any woman who agreed to marry him.

“Whoever marries me has to be willing to live with and respect my mother,” he said.

When I asked him for his reasons, among all the different ones he offered, the one he repeated more than others was that his father should not be replaced by anyone else, for that would be a betrayal to his respected position as a martyr.

Poyesh, on the other hand, told me how guilty she felt that because of them her mother had to live without a lover. “She was very young when my father was executed and when she devoted herself to us. As you see, she is still young and beautiful, but now she has become such an amazingly independent and strong woman that men are either intimidated by her strengths, or she herself does not find them interesting.” Payām did not seem to be too preoccupied with his mother’s problem, which Poyesh suggested it had to do with his “selfish male-centered attitude.” On the other hand, when I asked Sādegh why he thought it was fair for his mother to live the life of a widow for the rest of her life, he said: “She is not lonely. I will take care of her.” I pressed him further by asking: “I am not sure that the issue is that your mother needs to be taken care of. She seems to earn enough to take care of herself. But what about her other needs?”

His answer was rather shocking to me, not because it was unexpected but rather because it was so drastically different from that which one often heard from middle class Tehrānis of his age. In fact, in many ways, the differences between Payām and Sādegh were even wider than that one between them and their own parents. Judging by appearance, Sādegh, a tall, blond, and light-green-eyed handsome man, might not seem that different from Payām, even though his well-fitting but conventional outfit was distinctive from Payām’s yuppie-looking, expensive, Western brand clothes, shoes and glasses. But the differences between them extended far beyond what they wore. Class,

place of residence, family values, and various other interrelated factors shaped and were in turn shaped by their outlook.

These realities once again remind us of the paradox of the impossibility of translating “a people” and the necessity of such an undertaking. This impossibility is rooted in the complex and infinite varieties that characterize “a people” and renders not only the term, “a people” itself an absurd entity, but also offers insight into the fact that even an individual is not a solid, single being. This contemplation brings us also to the already-established reality of the partiality of anthropological truth and its never representative representation-translation. But my mind had strayed away from my surroundings in 2004, as now is going off in a different direction than our topic of inquiry. The new images that resurface from my memory take me back to the pre-revolutionary era, to the time of dreaming and imagination.

The Time Before the Revolution

How far does one need to go back in history to narrate the story of a revolution? How does one really know what factors were the real igniters of revolutionary flames or for how long the ashes had been burning before they turned into raging fire? All these questions have preoccupied scholars who have written on the Revolution of 1979, without a decisive conclusion on which they would all agree. Rather than a reflection of the failure of scholars, this non-conclusive investigation is inevitable to the nature of the phenomenon.³³⁷ “A Revolution for Every Theory:” this creative phrase by Jahangir Amuzegar beckons the incongruent views about the 1979 Revolution (1991:16).³³⁸

³³⁷ Interestingly, the question of whether or not it has even been a revolution, which in the early years after the revolution was the subject of many debates, has not been addressed by scholars. In the early years, however, many leftists in Iran did not consider the outcome of 1979 a revolution. They argued that there had been no structural economic and social changes after 1979, and therefore one cannot speak of a

But again, where does one begin to tell this history of revolution which is always about the amalgamation of unfulfilled desires and dreams and of castrated hopes. One could go back several centuries, to Persians' conversion to Islam—a conversion that has, at least in modern time, been tainted with a melancholic national and religious identity.

³³⁹ This is a melancholia that in Judith Butler's sense of the term, is the basis of one's identity formation and yet the very source of its inherent tension, a subjectivity and identity that is born out of loss and is thus always already melancholic.³⁴⁰ Or one could recall more recent losses to Russia and to the Ottoman Empire. Iranians' relationship to colonialism is of course no less ambiguous. That Iran was never entirely colonized even

revolution but rather of an "uprising" (ghiyām), which brought about a change of regime but not structural transformation in the mode of production or the socioeconomic system. In a revolutionary song of a leftist organization, "Peikār Dar Rāh-e-Āzadi-e-Tabagheh-ye-Kārgar" (Struggle in the Path of Workers' Liberation), the sound of the feet of the Revolution could still be heard. These leftists referred to the events of the month of the February (Bahman in Iranian calendar) of 1979, which led to the formation of a new state, not as "Islamic Revolution" (Enghelāb-e-Islāmi) but as "Bahman uprising" (Ghiyām-e-Bahman). These disagreements faded away, perhaps due to the commonality of the usage of the word by the majority of people and the leftists' weakened position in Iran.

³³⁸ Kurzman goes further and suggests that offering simple explanations into how the 1979 Revolution occurred is impossible. He writes, instead: "I'd like to incorporate unpredictability into an 'anti-explanation' and deploys this term as "an attempt to understand the experience of the revolution in all its anomalous diversity and confusion, and to abandon the mirage of retroactive predictability." For Kurzman, "anti-explanation begins by comparing the lived experience of the event with the main explanations offered by studies of revolution" (Kurzman, 2004:5-6). And yet what he leaves unexplained is how one reads the lived experience and who reads it has everything to do with the way one might find it explained or unexplained by different "studies of revolution." it so seems that for Kurzman, the "lived experience" is a single, non-contestable, and not represented reality. While I agree with Kurzman in the general sense that theoretical views often employ stories to support themselves rather than the other way around, I nevertheless believe that the stories we tell are also filtered through our eyes and our experiences. While I believe that we need to remain wary of subjectivity of personal stories, I agree with Kurzman when he writes: "I can't help thinking about the evidence that doesn't fit the explanations, especially the individual stories that can't be reduced easily to sweeping statements about entire population" (2004:7).

³³⁹ Nadia Saleh refers to this melancholia as positive, somewhat against that of which Freud in his *Mourning and Melancholia* speaks. However, both she and Butler detect more of a positive notion of melancholia in Freud's later writing, for instance, in *Id, Ego, and Superego*.

³⁴⁰ The collapse of the Sassanid Dynasty rendered this Islamic-Persian identity a tension-ridden and ambivalent one. The preservation of Persian language has often been used as a source of pride to compensate for this sense of defeat. The fact that even the 'ulama still do not and often cannot speak Arabic is noteworthy.

though its political scene has since the 18th century never been free from colonial or neo-colonial interference has been a grave source of anxiety and ambivalence for Iranians.

One could of course concentrate on the history of class struggle, ethnic conflicts, or nationalism to narrate a different story of the Revolution. I will herein concentrate mainly on the stories, dreams, and imaginations which leaked into daily life. Like memories and jokes, they were also awakening and were awakened.³⁴¹ They too were consciously invoked, as Benjamin suggests in his intervention on Proust's view of the involuntary rekindling of memory.³⁴² Revolutionary dreams too were stirred up by intellectual dreamers and in turn rekindled sleeping souls. Yet, in light of the relationship between power and collective memory, certain memories and emotions found greater resonance than others.

Is There Any News Anywhere?

The two common currencies of Iranian history, betrayal and guilt, did not fail to follow the defeat of the nationalist movement by the 1953 CIA coup as well. The failure to support the movement to the end and betrayal were common themes. The point of departure between different interventions was on assigning the burden of this guilt and betrayal to different parties or sociopolitical groups. Most of the religious clergy had not defended Mosaddegh's nationalist project from the beginning, and thus, while being blamed by secular intellectuals, they used the opportunity to distribute the blame among others. They highlighted one or another party or group, depending on their reading of the

³⁴¹ Like Proust's involuntary memory, which was invoked, as Benjamin narrates, "one afternoon," by "the taste of a kind of pastry called madeleine" igniting in him the memory of "the town of Combray in which he had after all spent part of his childhood," and yet "remembered it so poorly."

³⁴² In Proust's view, this remembering occurs "somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object, (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us), though we have no idea which one it is. As for the object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die or whether we never encounter it" (cited in Benjamin, 1968: 158).

necessity of the time. The nationalists and radical left blamed the Toudeh party for its failure to support Mosaddegh and for defending the former Soviet Union interest over that of their own country. People were also blamed and blamed themselves for not having gone all the way to sacrifice for their leader and the movement. Mosaddegh's trial and his arrest and the silence of the people about it once again reawakened the familiar image of the Kufee people as traders in the Karbala event. Yet the metaphor that was invoked did not, or perhaps could not, go far enough, for the main political forces, the religious and the left, did not consider Mosaddegh as a radical revolutionary leader. He was, however, utilized by different groups in order for them to adjust their own relations of power with one another and with the people.

In his famous poem, "Little Messenger" (Ghāsedak³⁴³ --the pistil of the dandelion blown around by the wind), M. Omid, a late contemporary poet who was also previously affiliated with Toudeh Party and was disenchanted by it and by the defeat, expresses this self-blame and disenchantment with society. As though suggesting that anything that reaches this land will be missing in silence and indifference, in this poem he tells the little "messenger" to go away, for in his heart everyone is deaf and mute and no one awaits any messenger. But suddenly, hope seems to desperately crawl out from the depth of his despair; he asks the "messenger,"

But oh, you little messenger
 did you really go with the wind?
 Is there really any news
 anywhere?³⁴⁴

³⁴³ Iranians symbolically refer to "ghāsedak" symbolically as a little messenger and its seeing as meaning a message is on its way.

³⁴⁴ Ghāsedak hān cheh khabar āvardi? Az kojā, vaz che khabar āvardi? Boro ānjā keh bovad chashmi o gooshi bā kas! Boro ānjā keh torā montazerand. Ghāsedak dar del-e man hameh koorand o karand. Ghāsedak, āh rāsti rafti bā bād (M. Omid)? Ghāsedak is the pistil of the dandelion flown about by the

This portrayal of a deaf and mute people who do not even expect messengers was a reflection of the general feeling of the social ambiance after the return of the Shah to power by the CIA coup in 1953, followed by the establishment of his notorious secret police, SAVAK. Omid's despairing hope symbolizes the reality that life goes on and resistance never entirely dies out. The regime, of course, took every precaution to prevent it from taking form and coming to the surface. Confrontations with dissidents were generally dismissed by the media through their subordination to the news of the "rapid and steady progress towards the gate of great civilization under the leadership of the King of the Kings, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi."³⁴⁵

Challenges to the system were often obscured by being forced to the margins of the public sphere, in the least audible or visible margins of print or audio-visual media. Occasionally, they were brought to light only in the service of the regime's agenda to justify its use of force and its need for greater arms. In these cases, the intellectuals' acts of dissidence were portrayed and put on trial as sabotages against the nation and its leader, as plots to kidnap or kill the Shah, and so on. Although those life and death struggles that were occurring on a daily basis did not find a way to become public, they became metaphoric, imaginative and poetic devices for dissident artists.

wind, but derived from the word, Ghāsed (messenger) and with the K in its end, it also connotes a little messenger, which these flown pistils of the dandelions are believed to embody, for Iranians.

³⁴⁵The West and the state were keen to insist that Iran was really moving towards great progress. According to Amuzegar, in 1976, a major study whose publication was to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of Iranian development under the Pahlavi dynasty said on its dust cover: 'Within the span of half a century Iran emerged from semi-medieval slumber and backwardness to become one of the most rapidly modernizing nations in Asia and *by far the strongest power in Persian Gulf region*' (Amuzegar: 1991:3, citing George Lenczowski).

Even the most despairing expressions still triggered desires for change. Yet, only since the sixties, when the more militant guerrilla movement of the left and the religious emerged, *shabih khāni* appealed to people's guilt by invoking the martyrdom of a few righteous individuals for the sake of the society. Shari`ati's reference to the despicable survivors (who included all Iranians) was in relation to the martyrdom of members of Mojahedin Organization. Similarly, dissident artists, too, appealed to people's sense of shame and guilt. M. Omid described the gloomy atmosphere ensuing the coup of 1953, in his poem, "Winter," as: "The breath which comes out of your chest, turns into a dark cloud and like a wall stands in front of your eyes." But he also targeted people's silence by suggesting that "they will not respond to your greeting." Both the left and the religious intellectuals, like the mountain hikers, used techniques of embarrassment as a way of pushing people to action. "In the entire night there is no lamp; in the entire city there is no outcry," Shamlou lamented (1954: 155). Like the *shabih khāni* that offered the possibility of a radical reading, these techniques were employed by "committed artists," working like the word "*borideh*" (fallen apart) in mountain hiking, in urging the opposite attitude. The radicalizing political landscape from Palestine, Latin America, to Africa, Europe to the US reinforced this growing hope and desire for change, especially among the youth. Mina, a former inmate and the widow of an executed leftist, recalled her experiences of these changes, already in 1975:³⁴⁶

In our high school things had begun to change. Some of us no longer stayed at school for lunch to sing and dance. Instead, we gathered in my little room and listened to the voice of a dissident radio; we learned about so many movements in the world, from Cuba, Palestine, China, and Vietnam, about students' uprising in France, the civil

³⁴⁶ For a detailed history and analysis of the relationship between political changes in Iran and literature see Kamran Tallatof. Also see Setrag Manoukian's "Culture, Power and Poetry in Shiraz," in *ISIM Newsletter* 14, 2004, pp. 40-41, for the significance of poetry in Iranian culture.

rights movement in the US. We began reading banned books which we purchased under the counter. Our hearts beat fast while carrying them with us and reading them. We memorized every word, wrote them down wherever and whenever we found an opportunity to do so, so that others could read them as well (December 2003).

Conflicting Dream of Revolution

But if Mina's dream of a just society had found its chant in "Bread, Housing, and Freedom,"³⁴⁷ the original producers of which were invisible underground revolutionary cadres, the dreams of the majority of Iranians were compressed under a single blanketing slogan: "God is Great; Khomeini is the Leader." (Allah-u-Akbar; Khomeini Rahbar). For Mina, as she recalled in 2003, the dream of this utopian, classless and just society was "beautifully articulated, in the language of a young girl," by the late contemporary female poet, Forough Farrahzad in her poem: "Someone Who Is Not Like Anyone." In this poem, the little girl tells us of her dream of the coming of someone

Whose coming can't be stopped and handcuffed and thrown in jail,

 Someone is coming to spread out the table cloth
 and divide up the bread and pass out the Pepsi

 and give everybody hospital waiting room numbers
 and distribute the rubber boots and pass out Fardin³⁴⁸ movie tickets
 and even give us our share. I've had a dream (1966).

In 2005, Mr. Kabiri, a former Iran-Iraq War veteran, spoke nostalgically of the earlier days when his older brother "got his hands on Imam's writings and his recorded speeches." He recounted his memories of this period as: "We created a small cell of a few individuals, most of whom were from my high school, and we read, discussed, and

³⁴⁷ A leftist chant.

³⁴⁸ Fardin was a very popular actor in Iranian Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s.

distributed these materials. Commander Martyr Mohammad Jahānārā was also in our group.” I could easily see the pride in his eyes as he mentioned Jahanārā. It was as if in having worked with Jahānārā, who was later to become a Revolutionary Guard commander during the Iran-Iraq War and then a distinguished martyr, Mr. Kabiri was recognizing his own role in the making of history. He seemed to be highlighting and responding to the fact that history often forgets or even ignores the role of its real makers, the nameless multitude. It is often written as the story of the miraculous acts of a few distinguished figures. Again the underlying issues at stake were questions of power, submission and authority.

Yet, once again, the dominant discourse was more creative in evoking Freudian (1950) and Nietzschean (1969) guilt to define the revolution as redemption, a remedy for salvation, a revolution not merely, or even not so much for this world, as for the thereafter. This was not a revolution only for changing the condition of the present, but, and perhaps more so, a revolution for the past on which one’s salvation in the future depended. This revolution demanded the sacrifices of “historical survivors,” for the sake of the mytho-historical martyrs of the past. Iranians of the Shah’s era, according to Shari`ati were the embodiment of these “despicable survivors” who had lived for hundreds of years. Only rising up against the oppressive Yazidi Regime of the Shah would sever their association with the Kufee people and salvage their souls through a redemptive act.

Self-sacrifice and martyrdom were therefore not offered for the sake of the living but rather for the dead. Only through sacrifices would the sins of these despicable living be washed off, and could they connect to the martyrs of Shi`i history, now as sacred

martyrs. In this sense, every Iranian who participated in the revolution was a “Tavvāb” (repent), a Horr.³⁴⁹ To be redeemed, the living person was to rewrite himself and history through sacrifice. This rewriting entailed supporting and dying for the new Imam. Martyrs were thus carried along with the chant: “Oh God, oh God, protect Khomeini’s life until Mahdi’s Revolution” (*khodayā khodayā tā enghelāb-mahdi Khomeini ro negahdār*).

The Power of the Eye and the Eye of Power



On the left: the crying Shah is leaving Iran in January 1979, receiving last kisses on hand by the few still loyal to him. On the Right: Bakhtiar, the Regime’s last shot at saving itself, like his photo frozen in a small frame, became the lonely and unsupported Prime Minister. The people had already chosen other hands to kiss. The period of his powerless position was very short-lived.

³⁴⁹ Horr was a member of Yazid’s troops who became a repentant during the Battle of Karbala, joined Imam Hussein and was killed as a martyr. Likewise, every Iranian was automatically considered a sinner before rising against the Shah Regime. No wonder that, in one of his Friday sermons, the Imam of Tabriz, Ayat-ullah Malakouti, once referred to the women participants in the prayer, “as these sisters of ours who were previously prostitutes and have now become revolutionary Muslims.” The task of turning sinners into “Tavvāb” (those who repent) was undertaken as the essential duty of the penal system of the Islamic Republic and its notorious figure, Lajevardi. He found his own salvation in the killing and forced repentance of political prisoners that was to offer them salvation. Now whoever was not for the Islamic Republic and ready to die for it was to be killed as the enemy.

“We Iranians, our wisdom is in our eyes,” Mrs. Ghaemi had told me while explaining people’s reactions to two significant moments in recent Iranian history, that of the Shah’s return after the *coup d’etat* of 1953 and of Khomeini’s death. Two phrases are in fact commonly utilized by many Iranians as general characterizations of “we, Iranians.” The first, “our wisdom is in our eyes,” implies the unreliability of wisdom that depends on what eyes see, evidently instead of the wisdom that is drawn from “inside” by “rational thinking.” The second statement claims that Iranians’ views sway and float around in directions that are determined by the wind. There exists in fact a common expression for people who easily change their minds and sides, especially their political affiliations and positions, which is “hezb-e-bādi” (belonging to the party of the wind). One finds an interesting juxtaposition in the Islamic Republic’s “party of God,” which was to stabilize and consolidate the nation around the “unity of the word,” Khomeini’s (vahadat-e-kalamah), in contrast to the “party of the wind” as a metaphor of instability.

Once again we enter the domain of loyalty and betrayal, which is inseparable from that of submission and authority. At stake are the questions of the senses and sources to which one submits in pursuit of truth, a better life, or other aspirations. For revolutions are also about trusting one’s senses to lead, or to be led by ideas or leaders. Yet, imperative to this relationship between our senses and trust is the debate about whether or not vision has been historically privileged over our other senses. This issue is both manifest and yet problematized in Iranian culture, in terms “zāher” (the appearance) and “bāten” (the essence-the inner). In the following pages I will attempt to elucidate the significance of vision to power and the intertwined link between the impact of visibility,

invisibility and on mystification of authority and the complexity of submission to it.

These characteristics are shared by divine and state authority.

The loss of the eye and the Kingdom

The ideal king must be in large part the invention of the audience, the product of a will to conquer that is revealed to be identical to a need to submit....In such a theater-state...the role of the performance would be to transform not an actor into a king but a king into a god” (Greenblatt, 1988: 63).

And yet, in January 1979, the Iranian king embodied not god but the monster, in the eyes of Iranians. As in 1953, once again in 1979, the Shah was forced out of the country, this time with no return. Soon he would depart for his final journey. But before that, he would live long enough to witness his own castration by being stripped of all his honorary titles and losing the eye of his power, the SAVAK. Not very long ago, in an interview with an American television channel, he had bragged about his paternal relationship with [his] people. And here he was blinded symbolically in his photos and metaphorically by the loss of his secret police.³⁵⁰ The new state was finding its eyes in the Revolutionary Guard, or other forces of surveillance and coercion. In Khomeini’s words, “the revolutionary guards were the light of [his] eyes.”

The significance of the power of the eye and the eye of the power has long been a philosophical and pragmatic issue and subject of many scholarly interventions. As Mark Levin suggests “long before Plato...philosophical thinking in the Western world was drawn to the tuition, the authority, of sight.” He adds, however, that “these philosophical

³⁵⁰ The eyes are so symbolically important to the kings of Iran and so closely related to their masculinity that Agha Mohammad Khan, the castrated king of Ghajar Dynasty made a habit of blinding people and creating piles of their eyes, as though from the massive pile of eyes emanated the magical masculine power to compensate for his castration. See Freud and Hoffman in relation to the connection between the eye and castration.

teachings repeatedly insisted on calling to mind all dangers in placing too much trust in vision and its objects” (Levin, 1993:1). Even though Levin is concerned with Western thinking, a similar sense of the power of the eye and the problematics of its determinate conclusive truth has had a long history in Iran. As everywhere else, this history has its distinctive mode in modernity. Levin cites Foucault as having said that “the hegemony of vision at work in modernity” is “historically distinctive,” from other epochs.

This hegemony, in Foucault’s view, “functions in a very different way, for it is allied with all the forces of our advanced technologies. The power to see, the power to make visible, is the power to control.” According to Foucault, “panopticism...is the universal imposition of technologies of control” (Levin, 1993: 7). The fact of the loss of the eyes of the Shah and thereby the power of his regime, and the projection of the light of Khomeini’s eyes through the revolutionary guards and the formation of the Islamic Republic, illustrate the relationship between “technology of vision” and the power of the state in the modern era. The recognition of the power of the eye is highlighted in an Iranian proverb that suggests that “whatever leaves the eye leaves the heart” (*āncheh az dideh ravad, az del beravad*). It is in beckoning this power that the Islamic Republic has so diligently attempted to territorialize not only that which is to be seen, or not, but also the eye of the public, all the way to the world of the dead.

Yet this mystifying power of an omnipresent, dispersed, and elusive eye that sees all but is not seen has critical implications for and connections with the authority of and submission to both the divine and the state. The post-Enlightenment binary opposition which has categorically been set between religion and secularism has resulted in an inevitable secularization of the sacred and the sanctification of the secular. This has been

the source of great predicaments and potentials for the Islamic Republic which claims authority on both terrains. But my goal here is not to rescue the sacred from its inevitable secularization, nor to evacuate the secular of its indispensable sanctification. I am rather interested in elucidating the intertwined relationship between power and recognition, authority and submission and “technologies of vision” and the politics of collective memory. These issues might be illustrated in the similarities and divergences both in discriminatory recognition of self-sacrifices by the state and in the views of the “revolutionary generations” and the “children of the Revolution” on questions of subjectivity, subjugation, self-sacrifice and martyrdom.

“Autonomous” Submission

In 2005, in a conversation with Mr. Kabiri, a former war veteran and a middle ranking government employer, I provocatively posed the question of the “nature of martyrdom” in the Iran-Iraq War. I told him that “many people both within and outside of Iran have claimed that the prayers, chants, speeches, and religious rituals on the nights of the attacks led the Iranian veterans into a trance-like state. According to these views, it was in this altered state of consciousness that young Iranians rushed to the front and participated in attacks.” I ended this long explanation by asking: “What do you think of this claim?” Mr. Kabiri’s unyielding confidence in responding positively to my question was somewhat dumbfounding. “Of course we were in a trance; we were utterly outside of our selves, beyond our skin.” Nostalgic pride and joy were reverberating behind these unwavering words.

Assuming that I had failed to communicate the “negative” connotation of the question to him, I rephrased it by explaining that “many Westerners think of such acts as

blind and unconscious massive sacrifices, rather than individuals' subjective decisions for martyrdom." Mr. Kabiri nodded in an expression of understanding and yet his voice remained as solid as before when he replied by posing a question the answer to which, he seemed to think, was self-evident. "With our total obedience to our Imam why did we need individual consciousness?" He added: "As long as we'd given our souls to the Imam, we were intimate with God; we were godly." Now as though living those feelings again, he said:

No doubt we were outside of our selves. This was not a simple trance; it was beyond trance. It was as though we had gone entirely outside of ourselves. We no longer fit our skin (*digeh too postemoon nemigonjidim*). Having burst out of our skin, we were flying out of our body, in the clouds. This state overtook us not only by the hearing of the "*nouhehs*," (the rhythmic lyrics of mourning), *do`ayeh komeil*, or *do`aye tavvasol* (religious prayers and eulogies), but even more so by seeing Imam's photos or hearing his voice on the radio. Now imagine the ecstasy that overtook those who saw the Imam with their own eyes. They came back as if Mohammad (peace be upon him) had returned from the cave of Hara after the Revelation. We no longer felt like we walked on our own feet."

Did you ever see him," I asked Mr. Kabiri. "No, I was not lucky," he said. But then, somewhat in a trance-like state, and no longer looking at or perhaps even seeing me, he began talking.

I saw those who came back having seen him. It was exactly like the way those about to be martyred walked, as though no longer carrying their own bodies. It was as though they were floating on the clouds in the sky or in a sea, on sacred hands, sacred feet. Who really needed these hands and feet [he stretched his arms and opened his hands on his palms as he moved his feet up]; in such moments we felt submerged in sacred light. I have seen those who turned into the light, already martyred even before dying. I was not lucky to be in the front for long but in that short period, I saw so many martyrs who went into convulsions the night or hours before their martyrdom. They were shown a glimpse of heaven before they entered it through martyrdom; they feverishly shivered in excitement and joy.

Two thoughts floated in my mind as I listened to Mr. Kabiri: the collapse of the distinction between seeing Khomeini and the divine, and the memory of the original Submission.

The Original Submission

“Iqra” (Recite!) It had all begun with this word, which had suddenly and unexpectedly begun to echo in the mountains and shake the walls of the Cave Hara. Jolted out of the tranquility of his solitude, Mohammad had trembled at the sound of this authoritative word. The Voice had repeated, now with greater vigor, “Recite in the name of God, the Compassionate and the Merciful”! Mesmerized by this mysterious “event,” somewhat mechanically, Mohammad had repeated the words of the invisible God which came to him through the mediatory Voice of the Angel Jabrail. Still feverish and bemused, Mohammad had descended from the mountain and confided his sacred “secret” in his wife, Khadijeh. It was at this moment of its narration, in being “seen” in language that the “revelation” was revealed to him. Only then, he could “see” and contemplate the meaning of this invisible thus divine secret, the burden of its responsibility, and the authority that it entailed. It was in this process of experiencing, witnessing, and reflecting in which the ear and the tongue compensated for the mysteriousness of the invisible, the absence of vision, that a mysterious divine vision was revealed through speech, through language. Through this narration, Khadijeh and Mohammad became cognizant of the trust, authority, and the risks thereof, with which he, and through him others connected with him, had been bestowed.

In 2004, Mr. `Emadi, an Iran-Iraq War veteran, advised me that the fact that “God trusted an *ommi* (illiterate) man with his sacred Word, should not be taken lightly. “The prophet’s nickname was “*Amin*” (good trust-keeper), for he was known to be a reliable trust- keeper,” Mr. `Emādi asserted. The designation of an “*ommi*”³⁵¹ (illiterate), yet an “*Amin*” (reliable trust-keeper), to carry God’s “*Amānat*” (Trust), God’s Message, to the people has grave implications not merely for the original submission, but for submission at large. In fact the notion of “*amānat*” lies at the core of Shi`i doctrine, both as the life with which human beings are entrusted and as God’s message revealed to Mohammad, the Prophet. The early split in the Islamic community between Shi`i and Sunni has often been explained as a result of a dispute over succession via election or kinship. But many Shi`i Muslims, including Mr. `Emadi, propose a different narrative. The right of the Shi`i Imams to succession, this view suggests, is legitimized not merely by their kinship ties, but as an “*amānatdār*” (trust or deposit- keeper). The crucial significance of “*amānat*” is manifest in recent history, in the trust Iranians bestowed in Khomeini as an “Imam.”

Mohammad’s characteristics, an “*ommi*” (illiterate) and an “*amin*” (reliable deposit-trust keeper)³⁵² are essential to his position as a messenger of God. His “illiteracy” is as seminal to his prophecy as is his reliability in preserving the Trust. As

³⁵¹ *Ommi* carried with it several other possible meanings, but illiterate is the more commonly accepted one and for reasons clear to my argument here I have chosen this meaning.

³⁵² I tend to read this story of Origin in relation to a yet more original story, that of Adam and Eve, in which both traits, the “Omminess” (illiteracy) and “*amānatdārī*” (trust keeping) were as significant. Almost like angels, Adam and Eve were creatures, neither alive nor dead. Without knowledge, personal interests, emotions, memory, or connections, they could not become nor could they cease to exist. But they jeopardized the “Trsut-trust” that God had bestowed in them by eating the apple of knowledge. This sin was punished by God by throwing them out of heaven, by granting them both their lives and deaths, and burdening them by pain, survival, sin, guilt, responsibility, memory, so on and so forth. It is the very annihilation of their status as “*ommi*” and “*amin*” which necessitates the sending of the Guidance, the Prophets and the Imams to lead the now fallible human beings towards the right path, from which they have strayed by the eating of the apple of knowledge, and thus by interfering to interpret the omniscient Truth of God by multiple human truths.

an “illiterate,” he would not offer his own subjective reading. He would rather act as a mere medium and only recite what he is told. Neither would he amend the Sacred Words, the Trust. To be a “*Rasoul*,” a messenger, he must be a medium who submits to the voice of authority that speaks through and onto him. Yet at that very moment he chooses to repeat the words, he becomes an agentive subject of this submission.

Mohammad is a perfect choice for becoming the Messenger of God also because of his orphan status (*yatimi*) and his modest yet noble family background. The condition of possibility of being endowed with this reputation as an *amin* (a good trust keeper) was provided precisely because he had to work for others. Through this employment for others, the rich businesspeople who trust him with their wealth, he is able to prove himself as morally virtuous. His being acknowledged as an “*amānatdār*” (a trustworthy deposit keeper), is derived from this own deprivation from private property and his duty to protect that of others. His primary reputation leads Khadijeh, a rich business woman, first to make him her business agent and later her husband. Through her trust, the entire business community comes to trust Mohammad with their “sacred” wealth and their private property.

Only after his “*amānatdārī*” (trust keeping) with wealthy people’s sacred values, their wealth and private property, is established does he become eligible to receive the Divine Trust, God’s Capital, “*Kalām-i Moghaddas*” (Sacred Words). Through his primary submission to the authority of a rich business woman, Khadijeh, Mohammad proves himself worthy of God’s trust in the reliability of his utter submission to the Divine. It is this trust that engenders the condition of possibility for Mohammad’s metamorphosis from an “*amin*” business agent to a “*Rasoul*” (the Messenger), and finally

to an authoritative “*Nabi*” (Prophet). The “*Rasoul*,” encapsulated the “*Amin*” and the “*Nabi*” envelopes them both. In turn, by the recitation of the words: “I testify that there is no god but God and Mohammad is God’s messenger” (*Ashahado Anna La Elahaellalah. Ashahdo Anna Mohammadan Rasoul ullah*), Khadijeh submits to Mohammad’s authority and becomes the first believer of God’s Prophet, and thus of God.³⁵³

New Submissions

In April 2005, I asked Mr. Kabiri how he felt when his hometown, Khorramshahr, was invaded by the Iraqis in the first few days of their attack on Iran and remaining occupied for over two years. “How did you experience this loss and the later victory in regaining your hometown?” I asked him. Once more, Mr. Kabiri did not fail to shock me with a not-unfamiliar but still surprising response. “I did not really care,” he sharply answered and then as though responding to my puzzled look, he explained: “It wasn’t my town for which I was fighting.” I provocatively said: “but you were telling me a while ago about all those memories of your childhood and your life as a teenager in Khorramshahr. They must have made some kind of emotional connection to this place, no?”

Mr. Kabiri emphasized his indifference by explaining: “My reason for fighting was not nationalistic or for personal sentiments. I was fighting only for Islam and for the

³⁵³ In converting from submission to multiple authorities, Muslims submit to the authority of a single God, a single Faith, and a single “Ommat” (community). In declaring this testimony Muslims express their willingness to become martyrs, witnesses, and survivors. For the terms “ashhad” or shahada are derived from the same root as “shahid” (martyr), “Shahādat” (martyrdom), which also connotes giving testimony, and “shāhed,” (witness, testifier). Every “shahid,” (martyr) is perceived to be also a “shāhed”, an ever-present witness and testifier. This single testament therefore foretells and lays out all that this submission implies: a subjective declaration of their readiness to respond to the call, to sacrifice or be sacrificed for it, become the survivor, witness, and messenger of that call. This is all articulated in one breath, a declaration that announces one’s becoming a Muslim and one’s submission to God’s call.

Imam [Khomeini].” Accentuating it even further, he went on: “I did not think of either my life or my death as mine; they belonged to the Imam. My only shame and regret is that I did not and could not give them to the Imam. I could not stay at the front because my mother was sick and I had to take care of her. But who knows, probably I was not worthy enough to be martyred.” Several times during our conversation in April 2005, Mr. Kabiri expressed his feeling of shame and regret for, in his words, not deserving to be martyred.

I wondered if this guilt and shame was a reaction--unconscious perhaps?--to the fact that he had chosen his family and earthly obligation, taking care of his mother, over the “divine” call. Yet over and over, I felt that I could detect a sense of anger as well as regret, as though having to undertake a graver, albeit less desirable, self-sacrifice had deprived him of committing the ultimate sacrifice by becoming a martyr. It was not unusual for some religious people to repeat Khomeini’s words that the war was not for the soil but for Islam, especially in the early years of the war. Yet I could not help but think that Mr. Kabiri’s expression of indifference to the fate of his hometown was a compensation for his choice of family responsibility over divine obligation.

In April 2005 Mr. Kabiri spoke to me of his disillusionment with the situation in the county, and of his changed attitude towards the state, which he said had strayed away from the path of his Imam. “Things are very different now,” he suggested. But suddenly, with a tone as if he were speaking from a space of dream or hallucination, or talking to himself, he said:

In those days I lived and wished to die solely for the Imam and Islam. It was such a glorious time. We had no regrets when we lost our friends; our only regret was that we had not ourselves joined them. We were so intimate with each other, with the Imam, with God, and

with death. The materialistic things that matter so much to us today were of no concern to us then. It was as though we all had turned into a gigantic united soul (*rooh-i `azim-e moshtarak*) in different bodies; as though we were all brothers, all belonged to the same family, of one father, the Imam. We were all ready to give up our lives for him. It was such a beautiful, unforgettable time, such incredible were those days!

His tone revealed and yet concealed something that was unspoken in his words; something that was unable to enter into “language;” something that hung in the air, on his facial expression, and in his gasp of breath, like a tortured inmate awakened in the middle of a beautiful dream only to find herself in her cell, with an aching body and injured feet. Out of that dream-world and back into reality, he was once again relating to me: “Nowadays, I do not trust or follow anyone as I trusted the Imam. These others are not pure. Rafsanjani, for example, he has made huge mistakes and his mistakes have caused incredible harm for Islam and our country. My relationship to the Islamic Republic is radically different today.” I interrupted and asked: “so does this mean that you would no longer be willing to sacrifice your life for this country?”

In his answer, I envisioned that bridge that links the total submission to religious authority with that of a rational citizen to a modern nation-state. “It is true that I no longer see this regime as a perfect and true Islamic government on Earth, but compared to these other corrupted states in the world, I still think it is better.” No longer an absolute submission to his infallible Imam, the *amin* incarnation of the Messenger of God, now his faith and thus his choice were conditional, calculated, measured, the choice of an “autonomous” subject, and a subject-citizen.

While Mr. Kabiri’s two states of submission might be seen as belonging to two different ideological streams, the secular and the religious notions of submission and

autonomy, I would argue that the differences between these two views are a matter of degree of trust and submission to authority. That, in Anderson's words, millions are willing not only to kill but to die for the nation, is not so much about the nation *per se* as it is about the question of that which people trust enough as the source of authority to submit to (Anderson, 1991: 7). Michael Taussig writes of the secretive status of the fetish: when it "is achieved, it is the skin of the secret that vibrates with sacred light, intimation of the *public* secret within" (Taussig, 1999: 58). In our stories of the mystification of political authority, too, a fetishistic authority and submission is induced. The notions of authority, submission and self-sacrifice should be seen in this light and in relation to the particular memories that take the form of fetishes in their invocation of intense emotions, while the source of these emotions remains mystifyingly obscure.

The key elements of divine and earthly authority and submission are not radically different in religious and leftist discourses in Iran. In both cases, visibility is ambivalently at once essential and absent. Both divine and earthly authority act through mediums that are simultaneously sources of dispute and yet call for absolute submission. For while absolute submission is to be offered exclusively to a single authority, either the divine or the state, it is through mediums that their relation is actualized. God remains sacred despite and because of the possibility of the medium that puts a distance between his words and wishes and their interpretation by those who claim mediumship. By the same token, the state, as Nelson (1999) suggests, remains illusively an abstract source of law and order while its constituents might be seen as monsters. The "shoulders for blame" in both cases are to be found in the particular relations of power in which the concepts of divine and state are rescued, while their particular materializations collapse.

There appears to exist an element of playfulness, a simultaneous display of rebelliousness and conformity, a seeming indifference to and yet a persistent pursuit of desirable ways of living among the youth of Iran. These attitudes are characterized and manifested in a profoundly lively, flexible, and dynamic spirit among youth in the post-revolutionary era. This “fun-loving” approach to life is often denounced by those still faithful to the dreams of the revolution or to their sacrificed loved ones. The “revolutionary generation” often perceives these acts as a betrayal or even a sacrifice of the already sacrificed, now in the “disrespectful behaviors, jokes, satires, and language of the youth, these “children of the Revolution.” The following episode offers us a glimpse into the collapse of authority without a new emergence of illusions of autonomy, as well as showing how claims to maturity replace utopian dreams. And yet in the final analysis, I want to suggest that no appearance is a mere visual appearance. No binary opposition to this question of ocular-centerism or logocenterism explains the reality that, in the aftermath of language, our eyes sees through translation, already filtered through language.

And the aftermath

Payām: “Those revolutionaries were immature utopians. There is no such a thing as perfect justice, or a perfect society. Revolutions swallow the heads of their children. We all know this. You have lived it and have forced us to live through it. Dad’s death is its best example. What came out of his death, or that of all your friends for that matter? Our life is better now than it was under the Shah? These things you believed then and you say now, these are raw utopian dreams.”

Ferdos: “You youngsters are left with no dreams, no hope, no values. Such pessimists you youngsters have become! The defeat of the Revolution is embodied (*tajjali kardeh*) in the youth. How can you live your life without trying to make a change around you? Your father sacrificed his life for others, for a better world. But you know, this nihilism (*pochi garāyee*) will not last. All of you have now become Nietzsche’s copies, but things will change. They are going to change. Don’t you see how people are sick and tired of this regime? You weren’t around in 1977. You think anyone could believe in 1977 that in less than two years we would overthrow the Shah? That we would have 1979? You guys haven’t lived a revolution.

Poyesh: “And you have and this is what you have learned? Wow! Please wake up mom! These are mere wishful dreams (*khābhā-ye-khosh*). Come back to reality. When do you guys wake up to see reality? You still live in the 1980s. You don’t live a moment twice.”

Payām: “And what was the souvenir of your glorious revolution, mom, but a return to the middle ages, disaster, ruthless despotism, more poverty, and bloodshed? And why should we die for this? No, mom, the age of revolution has passed. The best we can do is to try to live in gray zones; to make our lives less dark, less repressive, more open, only around us, and just a little lighter, a little window for breathing. This is the most we can hope for. You know [addressing me] my mom forgets we are Third World people and the rules of the game are set not even by Khomeini, but by the British and the US. We are little puppets in their puppet show. I won’t play any part in this game. I’d rather sit and live my life in this little space I am trying to create for myself. I don’t want to be

anyone's soldier. I'd rather live in a gray zone than go through all that bloodshed for a day that will soon turn even darker than before."

Chapter 6

Thus God Spoke to Me: Martyrs' Dreams and Dreams of Martyrdom



A saint (Imam Hussein?) receiving a martyr in paradise

A subversive Intervention

In a meeting with God, the Prophet Mohammad and all the Shi'i Imams were lined up waiting to speak with God. God's conversation with Jabrail was prolonged. Imam Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, stepped out for the restroom only to return and find Khomeini having taken his place in line. Silently, he stood behind him. After awhile, the eleventh Imam came back to also stand behind Khomeini. On and on, until all the Imams were lined up behind Khomeini. With Khomeini now right behind the Prophet, the Prophet burst out. "God, why don't you tell him off? He has already forced all the Imams out of their place and is about to jump into mine." In agony, God replied. "Don't you see? I too need to temporarily step out but have stayed put for I know the moment I leave I too will be losing my seat to him."

In variety of different versions, the above joke which was told to me by various groups of people during my stay in Iran in 2003-2005, offers a peculiar discursive

commentary on the state, particularly, of Khomeini's excessive claim to divinity. This subversive mode of intervention belongs to the religiopolitical genera of satirical humor that is pervasive in today Iran. Yet, the fact that this particular joke, which was around when I was living in Iran before 1994, still seems relevant to people in 2005 is suggestive of Khomeini's continuous significant role in the country. I would argue that this enduring presence does not have as much to do with Khomeini's charisma in the Weberian sense, which emphasizes the personality of the charismatic leader. I rather borrow the notion of charisma as a performative social phenomenon from Thomas Csordas (1997), to explain Khomeini's popularity and the victory of the Islamic Republic in 1979. I suggest that neither Khomeini's unique character, nor the absurd assumptions of people's naivety to be easily fooled, as has often been suggested by some opponents of the Islamic Republic, nor arguing for "Iranians' pathological obsession with martyrdom" (Swenson, 1985), could explain this phenomenon.

To think of charisma's locus as "the rhetorical resources mobilized among participants in ritual performance" (Csordas, 1997: xviii) is to recognize the dialectical relationship between the leaders and the populace and the complex role of collective memory and performative quality of embodied practices. This socially performative quality allows for a better understanding of the seemingly shared concepts on basic issues such as life and death and divinity and yet the multilaterally subjective reading within the community. It offers the potential of unity and contestation within the same "unit," in relation to the particular modes of subjectivity. Attending the performative social character of this charisma offers a venue to do away with Marxian explanations that are grounded on the assumption of the Iranians' false consciousness about the clergy or

religion. It enables us to question the common views that “blame” the victory of the Islamic Revolution as a result of the easily fooled populace, or for their “wisdom being in their eyes.” It also circumvents the Orientalist notions of return to the Middle Ages because of Iranian people’s “cultural backwardness” (*`aghab māndeghi-e-farhangi*), their pathological obsession with martyrdom, or so on.

As a social phenomenon, this charisma is always already intertwined with popular and common beliefs, collective memory, language and metaphors and as everything else it is tainted with and immersed in relations of power, including that of submission and authority. In this sense, beckoning the social performativity of the charisma does not undermine the role of individual authority. The authority that is rather granted to the leader is itself a product of the constantly forming and deeply rooted beliefs of the very community within which the leader arises. And yet, the very possibility of the excessive power of this authority, Khomeini for instance, and the contestation to it are also derived from the dialectical relationship between the social performative relationship between the leadership and the community. That the Islamic leaders could portray the Iranian Revolution as if another ritual reenactment for the Karbala Event, and Shi`i history in general, is as much a social product of their own socio-cultural background as is of their community.

The incredible dynamism of the post-revolutionary Iranian state and its refusal to be reduced to any simple formulaic category such as democratic, theocratic, despotic, dictatorship, from among which one could easily pick to explain that of the Shah’s, is precisely due to this complex social performative characteristics of its charismatic leadership. I have chosen to call the Islamic Republic, a state of modern “*shabih khāni*.”

By this term, I intend to emphasize two interrelated characteristics of this state: the constantly rehearsed performance of its leaders to make and write new histories with familiar themes, rhetoric, metaphors, and symbols as if reenactment of an original event; and the diversities of views and phenomena that are compressed under the umbrella of the Islamic state, as if in *shabih khāni*. If we recall, from the first chapter, those characteristics of *shabih khāni* and their particular transformation at the age of media technology, many of the issues discussed in the current chapter might fall into “place.”

Both the joke about Khomeini’s goal to replace even God and the very possibility for Khomeini to attain such excessive power, I argue, are anchored in, and reflections of, the religious revolutionary movement and its leaders to invoke, appeal, and manipulate the socio-historical, religio-cultural collective memories in relation to the current concerns of modern Iranians. As a social and performative phenomenon, this charisma was, and still is, formed and reformed by and in response to the array of complicated factors, both within Iran and in relation to the dynamics of power and knowledge in the world at large. It was highlighted in the reading of recent events, performatively and in relation to the original Shi`i history. I suggest that the long history of the annual recitation and reproduction of Karbala Event, *shabih khāni* (its religious reenactment), has been essentially productive in the formation of this charismatic leadership throughout Iranian-Shi`i history. In turn, the performative charisma of the Islamic leaders, which was especially set in motion by Shari`ati and Khomeini, have been imperative to the “staging” of the Revolution of 1979 as if a *shabih khāni* (recitation) of Karbala and original Shi`i history as well as its continuation and reformation.

This chapter explores how the relationship between the past and present not as mere historical trajectory but as an organically living and social interaction allowed for the construction of present that, as in *shabih khāni*, could draw from different spatial and temporal mytho-historical realities. I will focus mainly on the dialectical interplay of these conceptions in social and individual life of Iranians and its formative and contested role in the massive self-sacrifices during the Revolution and its aftermath. I also explore the relationship between the particular notion of authority and subjection perpetuated by the Islamic leaders and the claims of the martyred Iranians and their families to having dreams and premonition before their martyrdom. I will suggest that these realities are products, and the regenerators, of the particular construal of life, origin, and history, in Shi'i-Iranian collective memory and beliefs, that were utilized in innovative ways by Khomeini and many other Islamic leaders in Iran.

The substance of history

Even though the history of “Origin” of the Islamic Republic is not an exception to the common stories of origins of most other nation-states, its peculiarities cannot be ignored. In its perception of a beginning and an end, it is like any other theological history. But its trajectory is by no means a steady progressive move forward. Its roads are rather envisioned, by these religious ideologues, as jagged, curvy, even circular--somewhat similar to Ibn-Khaldon's view of the circular rise and fall of civilizations (1989). And yet, again and again, these circles and curvy roads merge and reemerge in relation to the origin and the end. As in the art of pottery, where the shapes and sizes of the products might change but their constitutive material is always clay, the material of

this complex history seems to be made of blood.³⁵⁴ It is, in fact, of “clot of blood” that, according to Qur`an, God has created human beings—“We created you of clot of blood.” But this shared original blood seemed to be divided, as if in two basic types, and later to a few combinations of these two major types. These two basic blood groups appear to be the formative and the organizing factor of this entire history.

Is this division marked by that original murder of Hābil by Ghābil (Cain and Abel), the two sons of Adam and Eve, demarcating the murder of one brother by another as the first murder in the history of humanity? This might be deduced from the way the Islamic leaders of the Revolution of 1979 connected all their enemies to Yazid, the archetype of brutality, oppression, and corruption, and through him to Ghābil, the first murderer. Similarly, they suggested that all their friends are related to Imam Hussein, the prototype of righteous martyr, and to Hābil, the first victim. One might construe from this reading that the history is perceived as that of kinship based on blood. The battles of history seem to always be between innocent victims, from Hābil to the martyrs of the Islamic Republic, on the one side, and all oppressors and murderers, on the other.

This history is portrayed as characterized by hostility between the two kinship groups, as well as intimacy and esteem within them.³⁵⁵ In between are the mixed types who vacillate from one to another, and when moved to the side of the “good,” they are seen as “repentant individuals” (tavvābs). Islamic Republic produced many of these “tavvābs” in its prisons. It is interesting to note that the Arabic word “`alagh” (congealed

³⁵⁴ This shared substance of humanity finds a positive implications for humanity in the famous poem of the 13th century Persian Poet, S`adi, which finds its way to the United Nations. It reads: Human beings are from the organs of a single body and are all created of the same essence. If one organ is in pain, all the others would feel restless. ...”

³⁵⁵ Although interestingly, the relationship is based on esteem only among the good, those evil are connected only on their greed, material interest, or vicious intentions and plans against the good.

blood) shares its family root with “alāghah” which means esteem. Thus, the esteem for Imam Hussein is not merely for his virtues or martyrdom but it is also derived by a semi-familial connection.³⁵⁶ The Persian idiom “khoonesh mikesheh” (his or her blood draws closer) is often used in situations where a blood relationship is not known but instinctively acted upon. One is drawn to someone, according to the view behind this idiom, simply because that blood connection exists, regardless that one has a direct knowledge of it or not. Of course the cultivation of the esteem through physical closeness is effective but the esteem is essentially already in the blood.

Would it be too far fetched if one ventures to suggest a connection between this relation and the idea of blood as contaminating? That the mixing of blood disrupts the boundary of the good and evil, the sacred and the profane? Is this why the martyrs’ blood is considered pure and non-contaminating for the very martyrdom proves the dept of the esteem for and thus the kinship relation to Imam Hussein, thereby to the sacred? Whether or not one’s answer to these questions is yes, the Islamic Republic ideologues have employed and implemented this mythical concept in their writing and reading of history and the construction and consolidation of the Islamic Republic, with grave implications. Lajevardi, the Revolutionary Court Persecutor in 1980s, underscores this notion of contaminating effect of blood when he suggests that even the “fetuses of the leftists should be eliminated for they are carrying the blood of their evil parents.”³⁵⁷

³⁵⁶ In her lecture in April 6th 2006 at Columbia University, which was entitled “Trafficking in Signs in a Secular Age,” Saba Mahood suggested that the reaction of the “Islamic Community” to the offense of Danish Cartoons had to do with the relationship between the Muslims and their Prophet which, according to her, is based on intimacy and imitation. She argued that the Prophet is a role model for these Muslims in refashioning their selves and in this sense offense is felt very much as a personal offense.

³⁵⁷ He repeated this phrase, over and over, both in his private and public interactions with the political inmates.

While blood appears to be the common substance that makes these jagged trajectories come together as a single history, I would argue that language is an indispensably significant factor in rendering this history even more complicated. Words are believed to be no less contaminating than blood. The safeguarding of the sacred word has firmly been commanded as well as elimination of the evil ones. The survival of the sacred progeny is reliant both on salvaging the sacred word and pure blood from mixing with profanity. In fact Islamic advocates have argued that Qur`an is a miracle for two reasons; that its artistically and poetically incomparable and superior text not only could not have been written by an “ommi” (illiterate) but by any other human being; and that unlike other sacred books before itself, Qur`an has remained completely pure—it has not gone through any revisions or amendment.

Let’s remind ourselves that recitation and pen are central to Qur`an. The first word of Revelation, “iqra,” is a command to recitation, which begins by naming God, the ultimate authority, as the creator of human beings: (Recite in the name of God who created you of the clot of Blood). Revelation orders an articulation of the acknowledgement of the substance of humans’ creation and their creator, in language. That Revelation descends to an “Ommi” (illiterate) and a “yatim” (orphan) and that the Prophet is told not to try to decipher but to only repeat the words as they come to him offers an incredible insight into the dynamic of the relationship between life, language and authority. The modern performative reading and utilization of this dynamic by Islamic leaders has done marvel for the Islamic Republic.

By juxtaposing the above commands of Qur`an, one can draw three interrelated conclusions that have often been pointed out by the Iranian Shi`i leaders. Firstly: life is

as an “amānat” (trust) from God, as Qur`an Remarks: “From God we have come and to him we will return;” or as common expressions have it, “he has given it himself and will himself take it back.”³⁵⁸ Secondly, God is the ultimate authority and submission to him and his Words is the only way to salvation and return to the origin. Finally and thirdly—and this is my articulation of the subtle reading of the Islamic Republic Ideologues—having been created of blood, our lives and history is bounded to and with our blood relation. So repeatedly this connection is emphasized that in her letter to Khomeini, Zahra, a seven year old Iranian girl and the winner of a competition titled: “A letter to the imam,” writes:

I only have one wish in my life, actually two wishes: one is to see you one more time, and the other is to be fortunate enough to be graced by martyrdom. I know I am not worthy of either of these wishes. But I beg you to pray for me to have my wishes fulfilled. You see, just like you, I am a Sayyid too, I think I am entitled to see my own cousin one more time, very humble and insignificant as I am (Cited in Chelkowski and Dabashi, 2000: 244).

Two claims to blood relation with Imam Hussein are implied in Zahra’s letter, her genealogically identified connection to the family of the Prophet as a Sayyed and thereby to Imam Hussein, whom she calls her cousin, and the notion of martyrdom that automatically brings one to connection with Imam Hussein. The very fact that she does not name the cousin but both Khomeini and Iranians would immediately recognize that she is talking about Imam Hussein illustrates the depth of the immersion of religious symbols and metaphors in Iranians’ collective memory. Even though it is claimed that almost all the Shi`i Imams have died an unnatural death, by poison, except Imam Ali who

³⁵⁸ Hafiz, the Persian Poet of 14th century refers to life as an “`āriyat” (something lent) and promises that this life that God has left with him as a lent, he will someday see him and present it to him.”

was assassinated and Imam Hussein who was martyred in a battle, it is Imam Hussein who, as the stories that are invoked by the Islamic Republic suggest, will be waiting at the gate of heaven to receive martyrs.

Let's recall that in *shabih khāni* the boundaries of time and spaces are not impermeable. They rather often collapse into one another, so much so that the first human being, Adam, appears on the stage, having fallen from heaven on the Karbala desert. His mildly injured foot offers him his first experiences of physical pain and the sight of blood, the very indications of his humanity and mortality. Upon his complain about his pain, God foretells him of the tragic event of Karbala that was to happen in the same very spot, in a far out future.³⁵⁹

Shabih khāni's qualities were deployed by the Islamic leaders to perform the same complex social drama of the revolution in which all times became `Ashura and all spaces were Karbala. With every young man, Imam Hussein's Ali Akbar was once again killed but these Ali Akbars were now offerings to Khomeini. "This is our Ali Akbar, a gift to our Leader [Khomeini] (In Ali Akbar-e-māst, hedyeh beh rahbar-e-māst). Here is where the performative rhetoric at once turns the revolutionary movement to a "ritualistic recitation" and grants its leadership the possibility of ascending to sainthood, while at the very moment it secularizes the saintly. Such a *shabih khāni* led many Iranians to envision Khomeini as the incarnation of the Prophet, and all the Imams, even the absent Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, and yet as a singular "rahbar" and Imam. Incorporating them all in himself, he both embodied each and every one of them, and yet stood as himself, a "shabih" (alike-similar) to them. This double characteristic had a paradoxical

³⁵⁹ See Fischer, Michael J. and Mehdi Abedi 1990 in *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

implication; he was to be obeyed with the same total submission that was granted to the saintly and yet as a “shabih” who sought intimacy with, and perfection of, the saints, he remained a mediatory.

In accordance to this bio-historical conception, Khomeini was portrayed not merely as a learned clergy and a revolutionary leader but as an heir to the most important “Amānat,” God’s Sacred Word. To be heir to God’s Words is to have inherited all the virtues of those selected members of the family of the Prophet. A complex relationship is implied in this notion of inherent capacity to remain in touch with God’s Sacred Words. Like in genetic transference of traits, where all those connected by blood do not necessarily inherit the same traits, here as well blood relation does not simply guarantee the presence of the virtues that would make one a trustworthy heir to God’s Words. That the clot of blood from which human is created turns out to manifest itself in a jealous greedy murderer as Ghābil and an innocent victim like Hābil suggests that something else is at stake here. We might find a hunch in the following recollection by Mina, a former political inmate.

The interrogators constantly told us that we deserved to die because our hearts were sealed “ghalbemoon mohr khordeh) and no light of God (noor-e-khodā) could enter it. They said that someone whose heart is sealed can no longer hear God’s words; neither can she see any signs of God. Nor would such a person feel any love or connection to the saintly. For a sealed heart is a dead heart, they said; dead to God, these hearts only hear Satan and Satanic temptations (vasvaseh hā-ye sheitāni).

What causes for the heart to be sealed, in general, or in regard to these particular inmates, we do not know; nor is its exploration of my concern here. However, who defines a sealed heart, and on what basis, and the consequences of being deemed as owning a sealed heart are at the heart of this project and the very reality by which many

Iranians have lived and lost their lives in post-revolutionary Iran. As it seemed to be delineated by the state authorities, it is the total submission or the non-submission to the state that determines one's open or sealed heart to God's Words. No wonder that Ayatullāh Mohammad Jannati, who is known for his hostility to the leftists and bahais, in his Qom Friday Prayer Sermon in 1981 suggested that "if a group is unbeliever but believes in Revolution [read it the state] it is as if they believe in God). In Jannati's views a persons' belief or disbelief in God was not so much about God as it was about the state and its agendas (see www.Peiknet.2007). It is important to remember that his view was articulated at the time when the leftist Toudeh Party was defending the Islamic Republic and provided intelligence for it. It also defended the Iran-Iraq War and fighting for the state.

Similarly, the good blood type is not so much about the physical blood relation as is about the quality of the blood that runs in and out of people's heart, as it is perceived by the authority. In general, one's kinship seems to be determined based on the question of whether or not one is capable of and willing to offer utter submission to God. How does this utter submission to God get translated to Khomeini and the Islamic Republic? I would suggest that by the way the modern reading of *shabih khāni* disrupts the severely guarded distance between the original and the reenactment. The very dread that haunted *shabih khāni* that the shabih could get too close to be seen as "a'ien" (exactly alike-identical) was made possible only when the advanced media technologies and modern regimes of truths allowed for our mimetic urge to get closer to the original, to the extent of recreating and replacing it. Through the Islamic Leaders' performative charisma, the spirit of *shabih khāni* and the elements of Shi'i history were keenly utilized within the

current capitalist mode of production and its regime of truth and knowledge. It was in this environ that human life could be believed to be that of God and yet be exchanged or transferred as a commodity.

Life as commodity

The problem with martyrs' families has many faces. On the one hand, many [state] martyrs' families complain about the Regime's discriminatory attitude toward different martyrs and their families. For, it commemorates and compensates some families more than others. But, on the other hand, in rare cases where the family refuses to accept compensation, this refusal is taken as an indication of their resistance to the Regime. These families are very much despised by the Regime.

The above statement by Ghāsem, a working class man in his forty was related to me in 2004, in their small house in a neighborhood that has remained in my memory by its many alleys that were all named after the martyrs who once lived in them. I also recall its extremely noisy and polluted streets, with too many old cars and motorcycles forcing their way through its often impossibly jammed traffic. Even though my own place was not located in an upper or even middle class neighborhood, but since it was one of the many newly formed neighborhoods in the rapidly growing Tehran, it had wider alleys and streets. Thus no matter how I thought I had gotten used to the pollution and the traffic in my own neighborhood, every time I went to Ghāsem's house, I ended up coming back to my place with lost voice, soar throat, red eyes and an awful headache. But the day Ghāsem took me to see Akrami's family my headache was not merely because of the noise and pollution.

I had asked Ghāsem to introduce me to the types of families who did not want to accept the compensation. He said that they were not that many in the first place and of them he knew only a few. But he told me that he could introduce me to "this really nice

elderly couple.” I immediately agreed and said: “of course, please the sooner the better.”

The day after, we were sitting on the floor of Akrami family’s living room in their small house. A fading carpet covered the floor and a couple of white sheeted blankets were folded in half and spread on the upper side of the room with two large cushions leaning on the wall. As most Iranians would, they asked us to sit on the upper side of the room which is usually on the opposite side of the door. I had learned from Ghāsem that the martyred son was their only child and since his death they had lived by themselves. “For years after their marriage, they could not have children and finally after many years of praying, God gave them this wonderful son,” he had told me as we were walking to their place. The photo of a young man in his late teens was sitting on the ledge. It immediately caught my eyes as Ghāsem and I entered the room. But now, sitting under the ledge the photo on it was invisible to me. Yet, I knew that from where the elderly couple sat, they felt his constant gaze on them.

This felt rather strange. In all other martyrs’ families’ places, both of the dissidents and state martyrs there had either been no photo in the living room, as in Fedous or Mrs. Mohebbi’s place, the dissident and the state martyr’s families, respectively, or they were so many of them around that no matter where one sat or stood, their gaze followed. But here I was, aware that the photo was present in the room and to our conversation; that it stood above all of us, and yet I could not see it. I was so tempted to turn my head around and elevate myself from sitting position to reach its level and gaze at the stare of the dead in it. I did not. Until then, I had thought that the photos of the dead which stared at the living felt somewhat uncanny. But in Akrami family’s place I lived the unsettling feeling of an invisible stare the presence of which one is aware and

feels haunted by. It made me anxious that I could not look into his eyes and imagine whether he was upset by my words or those of his parents or not, as if I had been able to tell by looking into the eyes in those photos which had been in sight. Only later I realized that I had automatically replaced his parents to read him for me. It was as though I had suddenly come to an understanding as to why we often seek something tangible and physically visible as a mediator to relate to the invisible world of the Divine and the illusive state, or the dead.

I looked around the very clean and modest room. In fact, I had noticed how tidy and clean everything looked even as we had entered the small entrance hallway. The elderly couple was also so tidy that they appeared to me as if the epitomes of the common religious saying in Iran about cleanliness being essential to one's devotion to God. Even though our conversation lasted for hours, the couple was initially not that excited to talk about their son. The father actually said that martyrdom is not something that people should chat about as if chewing on a "dead meat" (gosht-e-mordeh). He also suggested that it was not appropriate for him to interfere in the relationship between his son and God and that their duty as parents was to protect the amānat [their son's life] with which God had temporarily trusted them. "Our religious duty," he stated, "was to raise him with love and care and teach him about religious values. But we had no control or authority over his life or death since he was not a kid any more. His life was God's." The family had allegedly been harshly treated and even threatened by the Martyrs' Foundation (Bonyād-e-Shahid) because they had refused to accept the offer for a trip to Mecca that was to be paid by the "Bonyād" (Foundation). I asked them why they had

refused the trip, something people wait for years for their turn, while they were even going to be paid, such a great luck. With his calm and low voice the father responded.

I could not accept their offer first of all because one's pilgrimage to Mecca is one's own responsibility. God has told us that Haj is obligatory but it is so only if you can afford it. You can't borrow or take money from someone else to fulfill your religious obligation. Secondly, and this is even more important to my wife and I, my son's martyrdom was based on his own relationship with God. Neither the regime, nor us as his parents can have any claim on his life. Our lives are God's as was his. He was God's *amānat* and we were lucky that God trusted us and invested us with this honor of raising him and letting him go when God called for him. No one owes or has any right or any claim here. Our acceptance of compensation for his blood is as blasphemous and absurd as is the regime's claim to owning his life. They have mistaken their place with that of God."

His wife, Mrs. Akrami added with an incredibly soothing voice. "If we accepted the trip or any compensation we would be suggesting that our son's life belonged to us and we have given it to the state. But this is a blasphemy. Our lives belong only to God." As she was talking, I wondered how she could remain so serene while reflecting on such grave issues. But again, I remembered another common religious expression in Iran "I am content with God's countenance" (*rāziam be reżā-ye khodā*), and thought that the family was the lived example of this expression. "Do you consider your refusal to accept compensation for your son as a resistance against the regime?" I asked both Akramis. Mrs. Akrami was the first to respond: "our position has nothing to do with the Regime. It is between God and us and our son. It is not even about us, just about God and our son." Mr. Akrami joined the conversation and with a gesture that was so familiar, in his keen Iranian style, "innocent cynicism" said: "unless they have really

mistaken themselves and their position with that of God, our refusal should not be offensive to them.”³⁶⁰

What is this tension between Arkami’s family and the Islamic Republic leaders about, one is compelled to ask. Why it that while Akramis and the State ideologues belong to the same discursive Tradition and believe in life as an amānat from God differ on such matters as their claims and debts to martyrs? What is in Akrami’s “merely religious” position which, according to the family, “is only between them and God,” that is so threatening for the state? Why, on the other hand, Akramis consider the state’s claim or even indebtedness to their son’s life as a disregard for God’s absolute authority? What is at stake for the Regime that it does not even attempt to utilize Akrami’s position as yet another proof of how selfless martyrs and their families are in offering sacrifices? The critical issue that binds all these questions together is the totalized role of the modern state and the extent to which religion is secularized and the modern states are sanctified. It is within the capitalist system in which not only life but notions of authority and submissions are commodified that the collapse of God’s absolute authority and the state’s totalizing role could occur and be contested.³⁶¹

The idea of “amānat”(trust-deposit) that was left with someone to be returned untouched and unharmed, upon request, has acquired a totally new status and meaning within the capitalist system where one’s deposit in the bank travels every where and is owned and disowned by many people. It no longer exists as that which was deposited but

³⁶⁰ How familiar this way of subtle and yet sharp critical eyes that was followed by an intelligent smile was to me. How many I had seen my father, uncles and many other older generations in Iran had the same very gesture.

³⁶¹ I should clarify that commodities and exchange did not emerge with capitalism, as Marx tells us. The issue is the labor that is freed as a commodity itself and solely at the service of commodity production.

as a virtual equivalence which can be acquired in substitution. The bank becomes at once the disinterested party and yet the place to which one turns to claim one's deposit, or through which one pays one's debts. The transformation of life as an *amānat* to life as a commodity is analogous to two different modes of productions, the production of goods for their used value and that of commodities mainly for their exchange value. Life in this new system is no longer perceived as if the land in the old system which was not privately owned but could be used by whoever worked on it.³⁶² Now, life is the private property that one can trade on and the state is the "supervising" authority, the bank, through which exchanges are regulated and compensated.

Now, let's once more revisit the Qur`anic verses with which we began this chapter about God who created human beings from congealed blood. The kinship division which appears so confusing in the verse that suggests all humans are made of the same substance is due to our misleading reading which undermines the congealed quality of the blood which the verse specifically articulates. Why this emphasis on congealed form? The congealed blood is pregnant with a potential of coming to life. But, the moment that blood runs into the veins, it becomes a living, performing and informative reality. Thus, a world of possibilities and potentials palpates behind this congealed form of life. These possibilities transform life from a petrified abstract idea into a throbbing reality of pain, pleasure, mortality, in short, life translated into its various realities. It is within the congealed life and its infinite possibilities that the divisions and

³⁶² In this older system, the land was an "*amānat*" (trust) or gift from divinity to be used to survive and protect the very life which was itself also a trust. But this view which sounded logical in its own time, could not make sense for John Lock anything that remained outside of the rules of private property was a waste of God's gifts or resources for human. He insisted on making God's wish fulfilled by taking away these vast, beautiful lands from being wasted in the hands of the "savages", whom we now have honored by the title of "Native Americans" as a compensation for taking away their home, let it aside their genocide.

divergences emerge. In moving toward actualizations, life and history take shape and become real. Thus it is crucial to keep in mind that what is really the substance of human is not mere blood but the congealed blood that becomes life only in movement and in performance and only in blending with that of the others. Only as a social phenomenon, in translation, in exchange, shot through language and social relations, life becomes life.

No wonder that in Arabic the word “congealed blood”(ʿalagh) which is the material of human life, “bounding” and “esteem”(ʿalāghah) and “suspension” and “closing down” (tʿaligh) all share the same roots. It is absolutely vital to remain cognizant of the fact that even the possibility of this conception and its conveyance is rooted in the system in which “all that is solid melts in the air.”³⁶³ The transformation of this congealed material of life to the liquidated commodity enables the writing of a history in which individuals come to own their lives as their private property which they can sell or sacrifice, in wars or in daily work. Suddenly the members of the kin become the shared owners to whom, upon the sacrifice of their loved ones, the state owes compensation and pension.

In a totaling system of commodity where nothing remains outside economy and even gifts are burdened by the rules of exchange, the debt, the repayment, and so on, the only, and even that only conceptually, possible way to detach oneself from trading with the state seems to be to disclaim life even for oneself.³⁶⁴ The state well recognizes that Akrami’s refusal to claim ownership to their son’s life deprives the state from acting on

³⁶³ This phrase is a reference both to Marx and Engels’ statement and to Marshall Berman’s book (1988) by the same title.

³⁶⁴ The flip side of this totalizing system finds its manifestations in liberal systems in which one’s life is seen as one’s private property for the protection of which the state works as a hired agent. The tension here as well revolves around whether or not and the degree to which the state should be given authority and responsibility to protect each individual life without harming that of others.

its own authoritative role. As the authoritative institution, the state considers the domain of its power-duty to regulate, facilitate, and supervise trading. The Akrami's family's position is based on a negative dialectic analogous to the suicidal act of a prisoner under torture who by denying life for himself or herself deprives the torturers from continuing to assert their power on him or her. It is negative for it already recognizes the all-encompassing power of the state; the only escape from this power seems to be an ultimate exit. Akrami's family attempts to survive at the margin of the system by their discursive break and yet they remain within the same system for retrieving the past at the age of modern nation-states is always already regularized under the rules of the state. Thus, their position that they see merely between themselves and God is already a political stance and a threat to undermine the absolute authority of the modern state.

An Exit From the System?

Imam [Khomeini] was our highest and most awakened consciousness. He was God's spirit (Rooh-ullāh³⁶⁵). He was our spirit. Relying on his consciousness, we needed nothing more. He was God's and our soul. In obeying him we submitted ourselves to the most awakened consciousness. Releasing ourselves of our own souls, we acquired his Godly, heavenly spirit. Through him we submitted to God. Through him we became intimate with God, we became Godly (Mr. Kabiri, April 2005).

These words which were related to me by Mr. Kabiri, a former Iran-Iraq War veteran, in April 2005, indicate a different relation to the question of the state and religious authority from that of the joke with which this chapter began, or those of Akrami couple. The audacity by which the joke anthropomorphizes God to make its point about Khomeini's excessive grip of power might be compared to the unyielding

³⁶⁵ His words tend to evoke and fuse the meaning of Khomeini's name, "Rooh-ulLāh" (God's Spirit), and the common chant of those years, "Rooh-e mani Khomeini" (you are my spirit-soul Khomeini). It was as if Khomeini was a medium, a link connecting God's spirit to his "ommet." Through him, the kinship was established not only with the family of the Prophet and with Shi'ism, but with God.

confidence by which Mr. Kabiri asserts his unconditional obedience of that very authoritative power. In the coexistence of these two inclinations alongside and in the juxtaposition of their varying senses of selfhood and subjectivity, the complex and diverse relationship between citizens and the state and their different roles and reaction to the performative religiosity are manifested.

I met Mr. Kabiri in April 2005, in a war-stricken, “oil town” of Abadan, which is located in the South of Iran in Khuzestan Province. The proximity of the town to Iraq and its economic significance for Iran because of its Petroleum refinery made it a target of Iraq’s constant attacks and bombings. In 2005, one could still find the marks of destruction of war in its landscape and in its impact in daily lives and memories of the people. In fact my trip to the town was itself marked by the memories and effects of the War. In March 2005, I returned to Iran for the second phase of my research.

The entire year of the first period of my research in Iran, I had heard, in length, from some former war veterans, had spent time with many members of the families of martyrs of the Iran-Iraq War, had been to mental hospitals where the war and fights still continued days and nights in the minds of its residents, and in the cemeteries where life and death were so intertwined that one could not easily say where one stopped and the other began. One even wondered if it was the dead that went on living while the living had given up on living. I had also befriended the children of martyrs, whose notion of life, death, and martyrdom, often appeared to diverge drastically from that of their parents. And yet somehow I remained unsatisfied with my research. Something seemed to be missing!

I kept wondering how differently the traces and memories of War in the southern and southwestern parts of Iran, particularly in Khuzestan province, which were directly caught in War because of their proximity to the War Front, might have marked its residents' lives. How important, I asked myself, the spatial proximity to the war might have affected their present experiences. In what ways, I was interested to know, living for the duration of the war in such close vicinity might have shaped people's senses of life and death and their future? I told myself that even though my work was not about war but visiting the areas which had been persistently subjected to the everyday and routine destruction of war, for eight years, was absolutely necessary. More importantly, I was convinced that that, as it was essential to compare the lives of the families of martyred dissidents, who had stayed in Iran with those who had left for abroad, to also pursue the differences of life and its meaning for those who had remained to live in the places in which people had lived and lost their loved ones. But aside from all these reasons, I did not tell myself that since my first return to Iran in 2002, I had fantasized about going back to Ahvaz also because of my personal and emotional attachment to it.

From 1980-1981, for about one and a half year, my late husband and I had lived in Ahavz, the capital city of Khuzestan. It was during the first years of Iran-Iraq War. For the first few months of this period, we lived in a large house that we learned from the family who had resided in it first, that it was left behind by a well-off family who had moved, most likely to Tehran, to escape the war. The house was occupied by a family of three generations who welcomed us, the two strangers, my husband and I, into a house whose owners neither them nor we knew. Unaware of their whereabouts or even their names, we however came to acquire at least a partial sense of their lives.

Like archeologists who put together stories about the unknown and unseen people's life style, gender, age, religious affiliation, and social position by looking into their material remaining, we imagined the type of family who owned this house from the size and the location of the house, the quality and taste of furniture, the number and types of the books, and even the cloths that were left behind. We wondered, nevertheless, if they had the chance to take anything with them, and if so, what. What those things were that they considered more precious or essential to be taken compared to what remained as their left over, we would never know.

Many things were left unknown to us about the owners of the house, but we began mixing our own pleasures and fears and pain to those their mattresses held within; their sheets covered us in those nice cool winter nights, which felt like late spring in Tehran. Their furniture began forgetting the smell and the weight of their owners as they grew more familiar with those of ours. I even appreciated the unknown owners' intellectual taste and possible political inclination which provided me with great reading materials. The rooms of the house witnessed our daily routine and its constant interruption by the war. Within its walls, our nightmares and dreams were preserved. In its kitchen we shared with one another our Northwestern—my husband and my family background—and their Southern recipes of Iranian food, mixed with the spices of history of our lives all across and outside the country and of different generations. My tears for the stories of the suffering of the family, especially the mother, which appeared like living an entire human history, were mixed with those that resulted from eating the unusually hot spicy cooking of the mother. She would mix the already spicy Southern meal with the recipes she had acquired in her constant business trips to Kuwait, which the war had put a stop

to. The money and the trips were no longer there but the tears and tastes of Kuwaiti spices were present on the table which had betrayed its owner but freely offered its use value to us.

Aside from my-not yet become-husband and I, the members of our family was constituted of an elderly woman who was the epitome of suffering and survival with hope burning inside her as if the very essence of her being, as though the blood in her veins. Every time one of us left the house, she stood by the window, about the time we had told her we would be coming back, and whispered in her sweet elderly voice, and Abadani accent, a song which requested “Alison and Valison” to return that person back to her. I do not know why I never asked her who these Alison and Valison were and what kind of control they had upon returning people back home. Perhaps because so many times I had heard the elderly women in Iran singing this same thing that it had lost its strangeness to me.

But I still remember that the way she stood by the window and sang it so sincerely was very different from the way the other elderly women I had seen would sing to play with their kids, not as a real pray or request as one sensed in her tone. I knew she prayed as other Muslim women of her age did. But it was as though in this state of total disruption of rules, her regular prayers did not suffice. Were Alison and Valisons, witches, pagan deities? I still wonder. Every thing in her being, her look, cloths, gestures, accent, language, and the wrinkles on her face were marked by the history of modern world, from colonialism, to state suppression. The abundance of “deformed” English words in her language for instance in the sentence “I waited in line for the bus to

go to the hospital” as “estādom to lain bos begirom berom aspitol” was a reminder of the dominant role of British in the town of Abadan because of petroleum.³⁶⁶

Another person in that house was a man in his late 50s, who seemed to have forgotten that he had once been a husband and a father, a refinery worker, and a bread provider for the family. He had left the memories of all these realities on the torture chamber, when the Shah had returned to Iran by CIA Coup which overthrew Mosaddegh, and revenged those who had actively supported him. He was a laborer who had believed that he “had nothing to lose but his chains.” He had thus fought to lose the chains but was now sometimes chained by real physical chains by his own sons. For he had not realized that in fact had he had something more than his life or his mind to lose, he could have perhaps been able to bargain as many of the leaders did. But he did not have anything to bargain on, and therefore, that “nice and responsible” husband, as the wife remembered, died on the chamber, with his ties to his blood kins, as though returning to its congealed form. The blood of this man who continued to “live” was a congealed blood; it had lost its potential for liquidation. His life had become a dead, useless commodity, a no commodity. Even the bombs did not seem to seek him out. So frozen he appeared to all the anxiety around him that even the War did not seem to have a way into his world. Once in awhile, though, he was engaged with invisible battles and then his estranged sons and wife had to protect him from himself by chaining or putting him to sleep by tranquilizing shots. No blood of esteem or hostility ran through his veins towards those around him.

³⁶⁶ In regular Farsi it would be phrased as “too saf istādam tā otoboos begiram beram bimārestān.”

After the family “lost its head,” or as the mother suggested, when “he returned without head” the mother also lost herself as a wife, for: “It was not merely that he had lost himself as a man and his memory of me as his wife. I too couldn’t find in him the man I had married,” the mother had confessed to me. She had to become the head and the heart, as she saw the father and the mother’s relation to the family. Turning into a modest business woman, she traveled to Kuwait to purchase items which she sold to his neighbors. She raised her three sons and her daughter, “the light of my eyes,” as she called them. “My two sons had just finished college and begun working as engineers; my third one was still in college and was also working as a school teacher. Things were all looking up but first was the revolution and then came war.” She had told this story to me so many times that I still hear it. The war and the new wave of political suppression had disrupted it all.

Once again she had to regularly travel, no longer the one to Kuwait and for business, but the road to prison where her oldest son was locked as a leftist activist who opposed the war. Not long after the war erupted, she lost his son, but “fortunately” not to madness, like her “husband” but to execution. At least he was now in the hands of God, she convinced herself. A month after the first son’s execution, the second one was arrested and in less than a month he also, as she liked to believe, was in God’s hands. Then, one day she had just finished cleaning and chopping vegetable with her sister-in-law and returning to her yard, she was still talking to her in-law, now just across a short wall between their yards. In the meantime she had called on her kids, who were playing around with their cousins, chasing one another from one yard to another and jumping over this short wall that divided into two a single house that the two brothers, her

husband and his brother, had inherited from their father. It was lunch time. She, in fact, had been able to stop his kids from playing and hurriedly wash their hands and run home by announcing that their favorite meal was ready. She did not know the details. All she remembered was a horrific sound and then pieces of flesh of her in-law and her kids flying and falling around. I remember that I still held the vegetables in my hands. "Some pieces of flesh had fallen on our yard. The wall was mainly gone. I ran home while my cloths were covered with blood. Was I wounded?" She was not but at the time she had no time to check herself out. Instead, she had hysterically run home to see about her kids. Only later had she realized that the bomb had hit and destroyed part of their house but not the rooms where the kids were. From her in-law's family, there had been no survivor. With great gratitude she spoke of this merci God had shown her family. It was after this incident that they had moved to Ahvaz and luckily found this house which had been deserted. Now with his only son, a daughter and her husband, and the mother's mother, we all lived together.

I do not mention the man who was once a husband and a father because it seemed that for him we were invisible. Neither did his visibility produce a relationship with him on our part. Soon we were passing him by as one might pass a forsaken monument or a photograph on the wall. Like the families of martyrs who create new life and new relationships around and by exchanging the memories of their dead, we created a new kinship among ourselves around our life histories of which the mother's memories of this man's past was a part. For the rest of us life was emerging in the midst of violence and death. In the end of the day, as we sat on the roof under the moonlight, and sipped our guilt and joy of another day of survival from the tea cups, the live concert of

the frogs was our outmost source of pleasure. We laughed at how the frogs must be singing gratefully because the city officials no longer had time to do anything about trenches that were filled with stagnant water and had thus become safe havens for the frogs. We watched the shining stars always as though for one last night, which we all knew it could well be.

In this occupied house of the displaced owners, we, the displaced ones, created our unconventional enlarged family. Our family grew not out of blood of birth and marriage but of the death and destruction. And yet a strong esteem tied us all together. This was a family created in and around mourning. Our intimacy and kinship tie were bloomed out of and in the midst of the pain and pleasure of secretive intercourses of political activism, struggles for survival, shared guilt for the very survival, and love. The love we felt in the midst of all that violent destruction seemed as ephemeral as absolutely “natural.”

It was here, in this house and in one of those nights when the other members of our extended family left for bed, that he and I stayed longer, as we often did. The city had almost no lights during the War. The stars thus shone their brightest. It was in one of those nights, that he, not yet my husband, reached to touch my fingers and our hands came to life with blood that was no longer congealed. It had been in this house and in one of those many nights that the city came to rest to as usual awake yet again for another day of bombing, missiles, death and destruction that he and I decided that our lives were connected to one another as though the same blood ran through our veins. We became blood kins, while so many were loosing their “real blood” kins. Almost every day around noon time, if one passed “Chahar Shir” (Four Lions) Square, in the middle of which four

exhausted-looking lions stood, one would see women, many of whom Arabic speaking, who scratched their faces until they bled as they searched through the piles of deformed bodies on the trucks for their young martyred sons, in the midst of the blood that had once again become congealed.

Resuming the Order and Private Property

Twenty six years later, I was returning to the region, now as an anthropologist. I was accompanied by a young friend, Poyān, to whom the conventional anthropology would have referred as an informant or an assistant. But he had never been to this region and was not even born when I was living in Ahvaz. He and I had our own ties not to War but to political suppression. His father and I shared the experience of activism and imprisonment. Poyān belonged to the group of children of dissidents whose father had luckily survived. To him, as to many other children of dissidents, I hoped to show the life on the other side which through media had been rubbed off of all its diversity and dynamism and was turned into an abstract idea of sacred eternal living, congealed in and by dominant accounts. From him and youngsters like him, I learned a new ways of thinking and living life.

A short two hours trip to Abadan turned to an exhausting experience of first waiting for hours to only learn that our flight was cancelled due, as we were told, to a sand storm in our destination. We then have to buy new tickets for Ahvaz, which would arrive there after midnight. As the cab drove rapidly rode on the road which I had never taken before, I kept wondering about my now lost family that I had found during the War. I thought about the way the mother and the family had taken the opposite direction from their destroyed home in Abadan to Ahvaz in 1980. I thought about the house in which

we came to feel so much love for one another. Did the house still stand? Did its real owner ever come back to claim their property? Did they sense the laughter, tears, dreams, nightmares, fear, pain and love that had penetrated in the materials of those mattresses, sheets, ...? I wondered if like Benjamin in unpacking of his library, they looked through the books trying to recall the memories of the time before the War and the places in which they had bought or read these books (1968). Did they also wonder whose hands had touched these books and what other memories were left in or taken from them? Did they recognize my tears on the pages of the book that was called “The Past Is The lamp to the Future Path?”³⁶⁷

It was about three in the morning when we finally arrived at the house of one of my relatives, the house I was visiting for the first time while I was taking a stranger with me. With such a warm welcoming attitude they invited us in that I could not but think of the family I had found in that house in the first year of War. Had this warm invitation anything to do with the kinds of displacements these people had also lived through during the war? Having been served tea in that hour was reminiscent of our late night tea in that house in Ahvaz.³⁶⁸ The stories of those years, during which the man of the family was a captive in Iraq and the woman raised her two sons moving from one place to another, had to wait until the morning.

Time flew and soon we were to take leave for my appointment with Mr. Kabiri, a former war veteran who was now a government official in the Petroleum refinery in

³⁶⁷ This was a book in Farsi that was a criticism of the leftist movement from within and I remember reading it with tears washing my face because it was so ironic that the past that was to shed light on the future, which was our present then, seemed to repeat the very problems of the past, only this time it did no longer seem, as Marx suggests, a tragic mistake but a stupid farce.

³⁶⁸ An Iranian woman who had just moved to the US only for a few months once told me she had really missed going to someone's home without having been invited or called before. In Iran, especially at my cousin's house I once again remembered what she was missing.

Abadan. I had been given his name and contact information by a friend in Tehran who, like Mr. Kabiri, was a native of Khorramshahr, a town about 20 or so miles from Abadan which was capture by Iraq and was recaptured more than two years later. After its recapture, its official name has been changed to “Khonin Shahar” (the bloody city), but people still like to call it with its former name, “Korramshahr” (cheerful city). Ghobād, the former captive and our very kind host was not happy about my appointment with Mr. kabiri. In fact he exploded and told me:

Why do you need to talk to these “hezb-ullāhis” (an allusion to the supporters of the fraction to which is now referred as hardliners)? Do you expect to hear the truth about the War from such people who spent a few months in the front and now benefiting from it in every possible way, including their high ranking? Come and ask those like me how we suffered. You know I had nothing to do with the War but I ended up spending ten years of my life as a captive and now have to work like a donkey.

Unfortunately Ghobād would be even angrier to learn that the day after I was to meet a clergy member. But to this story I cannot attend here.

My appointment with Mr. Kabiri was at five pm at his house. He had told me over our phone conversation that it would be hard to find a cab earlier in the afternoon because of the heat. He was right. At 4.30 pm as we waited for a cab, the town appeared rather ghostly. The heat was intense and there was almost no one on the street. It seems strange that in a town with this extremely hot weather, there are very few trees which could offer their shade to escape the heat. When I was finally able to find a cab, I asked the driver about it. “Oh mem, war destroyed everything and after the war they [the state officials] don’t really care about this town any more. The town is barely kept alive.”

As we drove through empty streets, I kept wondering about effect of this spatial proximity to the War and its impact on people’s memories and experiences. Anyone who

knew Iran before the War could easily recognize the enduring marks that the War had left on the geographic, demographic, cultural, economic and many other aspects of the landscape of most, if not all, of its cities and towns. The War's traces are everywhere, even in the seemingly subtle forms, such as the darker skinned southern and fair skin Kurdish children who sell gums and cigarettes on the intersections of streets of Tehran, Shiraz and Isfahan.³⁶⁹ War lives on in everyday behavior, language, and jokes, even among those youngsters who claim to have no recollection of it. But how different it was felt in this region so closely lived in its midst, I liked to see.

Mr. Kabiri lived on the other side of the town, in one of those so called “khānehā-ye sāzmāni,” (the organizational houses), formerly allocated for the medium ranking petroleum refinery staff. Abadan had grown mainly around the oil refinery under the British, and was thus very much a British model of the city; though in its margins the Iranian style of poverty lived its own life. In the British system, the management of the refinery lived in the best designed houses. Every thing was orderly and hierarchical. Under the Shah, the neighborhoods of the blue color and white color labor and the high ranking officials of the refinery and even their shops were segregated and distinctively different. It was due not so much to the Revolution but to the Iran-Iraq War that this segregated system and its well-maintained establishment were nearly destroyed. The names of the neighborhood remained intact but their residents were scattered around. The War had turned many of the houses into historical ruins; the classy neighborhoods with their bars, nightclubs, and discothèques had become, if not all ruins, but empty worn

³⁶⁹Bahram Beizai's movie, *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, is about one of these stories of war and the displacement that people experience because of it. A young boy from the war-torn Khuzestan Province ends up in the northern Iranian province, Gilan, and with different language, cultural background, and skin color, and as an orphan, he struggles to find a place and a sense of belonging in a new place and a new non-blood related family.

out spaces for the ghosts. Although that solid architectural divisional system has nearly collapsed, with the emergence of the new wealthy, other barriers had been created, not on the orderly British model but in the complex, enigmatic, postmodern “Iranian style.”

“I had never been to Abadan before but I had heard that under the shah it was like a little beautiful European town. But this town seems to bear no resemblance to a European town,” I told the driver. “Oh, that’s history now,” he responded. “But it has been many years since the war has ended. Why doesn’t it seem that the city has really recovered,” I ask him. “You know only recently, since Saddam is gone, people seem to believe that the War with Iraq might be over,” he explained. But even now we are fearful of another war. This oil is our trap, our nightmare. Every war targets us because of our oil.” The driver was still talking but we had already reached our destination and it was exactly five pm. With a box of sweets in my hand, I rang the bell of Mr. Kabiri’s house. I noticed an elderly woman on a wheelchair on a little porch. Her still eyes and frozen gaze reminded me of that, once a member of the family, man in that house in Ahvaz, in which we lived during the War.

She seemed as shrunk, as out of this world and as unable to see us standing right in front of her as was that man. I wondered at what her eyes stared? Was she looking at something in a long gone past, a non-seen future, or an empty time, at a void? A boy of about 12-13 was playing soccer by himself. Mr. Kabiri, a man of early or mid forty opened the door and welcomed us in. He introduced us to his wife, a fair skin woman of almost his age, who in a white background and little blue flowery design chador smiled and led us to the living room. Her fair skin seemed a bit unusual for a woman from that region but I soon learned that she was in fact from Azarbeijan Province. I also learned

that Mr. Kabiri belonged to Arab ethnic group and the coupe had met one another in Tehran, during their college years.³⁷⁰

Passing through a short, narrow hallway, we entered the living room, which had nice but not luxurious furniture. Regular formalities were exchanged and then Mr. Kabiri began talking about his activism under the Shah and how they read and listened and distributed Khomeini's tapes and writings. I could not help but think about all the warning I had heard from many Iranians about the "fabricated" nature of many of the stories about their political activity under the Shah told by those individuals who work for the government. According to these warning, these stories always claimed that long before the revolution, these individuals were connected to some kind of networking that was supposed to be somehow related to Khomeini. But Mr. Kabiri began talking about the War and his experiences of the front, it seemed as though new blood was pumped into his heart.

The authoritative voice of Utter Submission

In the previous chapter I wrote of Mr. Kabiri's confidence in asserting his absolute submission to Khomeini and his changed attitude towards the new leaders. Even though he said he supported Khameneyee, the current Supreme Religious Leader, his tone of support was less intense and absolute as his expression of love and absolute trust

³⁷⁰ At the time I did not think of a possible connection between Mr. Kabiri's emphasis on fighting for Islam not for nationalism and his adamant position in following the Supreme Religious leaders, Khomeini and Khameneyee, and his ethnic back ground. It was not unusual for some Iranians to suggest that their reason for sacrificing themselves was for Islam. But only later, when I read through my notes and realized Mr. Kabiri's strong expression of emotional indifference to his hometown, Khorramshahr, which was a bit unusual even for a devout Muslim, I thought of the relation between his background and his position. Arab ethnic group is in a difficult suspicious position in the South. They are stigmatized and ridiculed in the South, as Azarians are in Tehran. Thus taking a safe position, while working for the government, is often a tricky matter. This issue must have carried greater salience at the time of my visit because of the conflicts between the Iranian-Arab communities and the state officials in Ahvaz, of which I only learned after I returned to Tehran.

in Khomeini. We can also recall from the previous chapter that though he did not trust most of the state officials, including the president of the time, Khatami, he still lent his support to the state against the “outside enemies” and in comparison to more corrupt regimes in the words. While one might try to explain this conditional support of the State by retreating to the binary oppositional view of autonomous subjectivity vis-à-vis total submission, I want to suggest different possible approaches.

This would call for once again contemplating the relation between “original” Shi`i history, particularly the Karbala Event, and its reenactment, *shabih khāni*. One of the most significant quality of *shabih khāni*—(and again I emphasize its double and related meaning as similar reading and recitation of the original—is that it always has a claim to the story of the origin, even as it rewrites and recreates it. It allows for a “more amateurish,” “bad” reenactment and good ones, but never ever the original itself. And yet, it creates its own original history, so much so that when a man of the village who used to play Imam Hussein dies and a new one replaces him, for several years the villagers still compare the new “Imam Hussein” to the other. The real Imam Hussein is no longer achievable. The history of another performance acquires originality of its own.

A bad *shabih kahāni*, as long as a better alternative has not emerged can still do the work, and keep the structure and the themes alive. Unless the transgression has gone too far, as that of Bani Sadr, the first elected president after the Revolution whom Khomeini condemned, having a *shabih khāni* is still considered better than its total absence. In this way, the structure can always be protected by creating a nostalgic reification of the original, while the possibility of criticism and contestation can live alongside the safeguarding of the main system. For the system is portrayed as an abstract

origin, as if the original substance of creation, the congealed blood, with different potentials while there exists only one good type of blood, and one true kinship that is connected to the origin.

Shabih khāni always commemorates and sides with the “good blood” and “righteous kinship.” The “play” is always staged as the battle of the courageous small group of strongly bounded individuals against cruelty and injustice. As I listened to Mrs. and Mr. Kabiri, I imagined two simultaneous *shabih khānis* taken place. At one of them the enemy was the US and its unjust treatment of the Iranians and the abuse of their basic rights. Here, the good people were Iranians, in general. Both he and his wife suddenly began talking about the 22nd of Bahman demonstration of 2004, for the anniversary of the victory of the 1979 Revolution. They suggested that the massive attendance of people had shocked even those loyal to the regime. Mrs. Kabiri said: “That in that snowy and clod day so many people came to the street to rally for Iran’s right to nuclear energy, that even people who do not support the regime joined others, shows that this nation does not give in to injustice, no matter how powerful the enemies are. We have learned this from our Imam” [Khomeini]—again notice his appeal not to Imam Hussein but to Khomeini.³⁷¹

And right then and there, there was yet another *shabih khāni* setting a different stage of confrontation, in which %85 to %90 of Iranians were portrayed, once again, similar to the indifferent Kufee people. The couple began telling me that they are aware

³⁷¹ I only later learned about the serious protests in Ahvaz, exactly as the time I was in the region. The protest, in fact, involved Arab population which, the government claimed, were demanding autonomy. Many were allegedly killed, injured and arrested. But I did not know of it until I went back to Tehran. Now in retrospect I think it might be possible that they were more defensive about the regime, perhaps to avoid being seen as supporters of the protesters.

that there are only 10 to 15% of Iranians who are loyal to the system. “Yes we know that, even within Iran, they keep saying that only %10 to %15 of people really support the system.” Mrs. Kabiri said and right away her husband continued on:

Let’s say this is true, in fact it might very well be true. But you have to note that there is a huge difference between the 10 or 15% of the population and the rest. This 15% is really loyal. It is ready to die for the Islamic Republic while the %85 or even %90 others are indifferent nagging individuals who dare to do nothing, who are unwilling to sacrifice even for their own desire. Yes, they might stand aside and do nothing against the US, but who needs them. The rest of us are ready with all we have gotten. So let’s see what the US would encounter in case it really dares to attack us. We are not scared; we will fight to our last drop of blood, again as a “gigantic collective soul” (*rouh-e-`azime-moshtarak*). Let the US try. We are not Iraqis. We won’t be defeated.

Such a huge difference between 2004 and 1980 but an uncanny feeling overtook me: the rhetoric of those years and the staging of another similar reading (*shabih khāni*) was already present in Mr. Kabiri’s statement. What was even more unsettling was that two contradictory feelings were burning me inside. On the one hand, I was hurt because, especially in Mrs. Kabiri’s tone, as she asked about my project, in her suspicious tone, I sensed that she spoke with me as though I were a messenger, if not from but, to the US. It was as though she was measurably saying things that I was to relate to the US government. As though she imagined me having returned to the US and telling government agents: “Oh no, they are really ready and strong; so I don’t think you should attack them.” It was as if they, or at least she, had taken me as one of those anthropologists who provides the Western governments with necessary information to decide how to pursue their imperialistic advances in other countries.

Was I, in their eyes, one of those “native informants” who trade their people to help the West to rule the world? Was I one of those whom Hamid Dabashi warningly writes, as best seller literary weapons in the hand of the US war mongers? Or had I already become a foreigner to them? If so, was I like that foreigner who appears in the midst of *shabih khāni* to cry for Imam Hussein and his family’s predicament so to indicate the gravity of the cruelty of the enemy and the righteous of the Imam and his family? Was I also to act as a symbol, as that westerner in *shabih khāni* who was to show that so unjust and brutal the treatment of the Imam was that even a non-Muslim Westerner felt sympathy for the oppressed?

While wounded inside, I had become defensive and was trying to clarify my position. But I caught myself entangled with yet another disturbingly contradictory emotion. I found myself at once somewhat happy that there was still a strong possibility of resistance in Iran which, I hoped that could by its very articulation have a preventive effect on the US decisions in continuing and expanding on its absurd wars in the world. I could not and did not want to even imagine the real possibility of the confrontation. And yet, I shivered inside, as I recalled how those Iranians who did not support or actively participate in the War against Iraq, during the Iran-Iraq War, or strayed away from the state ideology, suffered grave consequences of their views.

As I sat in Mr. Kabri’s living room, my mind was at once preoccupied by the image of the past, and a near future. My heart was crying, simultaneously, for those young kids who fought with their mothers to go to front and were martyred and for those who were arrested distributing pamphlets against war, were tortured, and executed sometimes in a course of a few days. It tried to avoid seeing another image that was

forcing itself on my mind. This was the image of a future whose horror was too overwhelming. I closed my eyes but could not entirely shut my mind off from envisioning the consequences of a yet new claim to the origin which would once again enclose the gray zones of possibilities of life and connections to different blood types. Once again, the kinship of good and evil was to be resurrected from not long gone past. I could envision the 15% loyal to Khameneye rewriting a new history with their claim to Khomeini as the origin. It was a perspective of fighting the external enemy while targeting the 85% within who had to either turn into “repentant individuals” (*tavvābs*) and embody “Horror” or be eliminated as Yazidis so that Hussienis could prevail. Both the image and the imagination were too violent.

Out of despair, I suddenly looked at my young friend, Poyān; even though he looked pale but a mild smile was detectable on his face. I suddenly remembered his jokes, and his way of changing all the “sacred words” into erotic sensualities. Would the youth be able to write a new *shabih khāni* that transforms its duality and its appeal to the origin? What would that be but a performative representation that beckons its always already representational quality without denying its own reality?

The Paradox of the Representational and the Original

All *shabih khānis* are practices, rehearsals, with the aim of getting closer to, but never reaching, the origin. This also allows for the aspiration for the perfection is self-fashioning according to the original role models and yet coming to terms with one's failure to achieve that ideal. Mr. Kabiri articulated this recognition of his aspiration of the ideal and his distance from it in his expression of his hatred towards Iraqis. “I still really hate Iraqis and Saddam and still think of revenge. I know and would love to be

able to overcome my hatred and forgive them. For I know God considers forgiveness as a higher quality than being revengeful, but to be honest, I don't see myself rising to that emotionally mature level yet."

Both in regard to the individual or the collective, like the congealed blood, the origin is also impregnated with all potentials. It is too forced to move forward, while its eyes are still towards the past, as if Benjamin's angel of history. It is this amazing quality of *shabih khāni* which was so keenly played by the Islamic leaders that allows for Mr. Kabiri to work for the government, while expressing his opposition to the state, through his appeal to the origin, in this case to the "original" charismatic *shabih khān*, Khomeini.

This characteristic allowed the Islamic leaders to bring to life the reified notions of the early Shi'i history by turning them into real daily social dramas, during the unruly periods of Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. Through their performative charisma, the congealed blood flew to actualize their intended possibilities. But as the congealed blood entailed contrasting and unpredictable possibilities, for human life, the actualization of this potential also diverged in so many different gray zones. Life was not a congealed substance but a lived reality that took various forms in despair, in pain, in death, as much in Akaramis ways of dealing with the origin as in Kabiris, always in response not to a fixed origin in the past but to that which one creates in and for the present.

Even between Mrs. and Mr. Kabiri different *shabih khānis* were staged. I wonder though if this was for the West, for me and my young friend, or all at once. While during our conversation, Mr. Kabiri did not even attempt to compromise his answers to fit the liberal views, Mrs. Kabiri had a different approach. She constantly compared and tried to normalize Iranians' attitude as like others. It was the unjust West, she argued, that had

portrayed a strange image of Iranians. There was “noting unusual about Iranians’ willingness to sacrifice for their homeland; everywhere else people sacrifice for their country or just causes,” so she suggested. She used the example of Japanese air force fighters during WWII who flew their planes to the American tanks and exploded themselves while destroying the tanks.”

But Mr. Kabiri took a different mood of approach. With a nostalgic sad tone, he now began talking as if to himself. “So intimate with each other, with Imam, with God, and with death we were. The materialistic things that matter so much to us today were of no concern for us then. We were ‘one gigantic collective soul’ (rooh-e `azim-e moshtarak).” This metaphor which expressed the depth of connections between veterans also spoke of this intimacy as in kinship relation; in his words, they were “all brothers and had one father, the Imam.”

I could not but think of the Qur`anic verses about creation, of all humans having been created by God from congealed blood, and of the story of the first murder of one brother by another. Was not this nostalgic sense Mr. Kabiri expressed far older and structural than that which he felt he had “lost” by the end of war? For had not the emergence of humanity and brotherhood always already marked by murder and the lining up of a group of brothers against others? Was Mr. Kabiri’s mournful feelings for the loss of that “clear” sense of kinship that took shape against a portrayal of a single enemy, for which the Revolution and the War seemed to provide a breeding ground? Or was it a far deeper melancholic grief for the loss of “original,” a loss that had occurred right at the moment that human had entered its humanity, just as the congealed blood had flown into

the veins and at once created and divided bounds between kins?³⁷² I can of course offer no decisive answer to these questions. What is evident is that, as all of us, Mr. Kabiri lives in present that is burdened by the history of the past, but neither he, nor any of us, is the entirely passive recipients of this history. Despite all the limitations imposed on us, we still read and narrate the story of our past, subjectively.

Was Mr. Kabiri subtly implying that the distance from war had turned its “realities” to stagnated abstract stories? Was this because he knew he could not tell all his stories from his position as a government official, even though a middle-ranking one? And yet, he was also able to express his disconcert about the current condition, as Akrami’s family had, both appealing to an origin to which in their view, the representation had failed to remain faithful. To assert their diversion from this representational state, Akramis appealed to God’s authority, which undermined the totalizing authority of the state. For Kabiris, who favored the preservation of the system despite desiring changes, this possibility was provided by claiming utter submission to Khomeini but remaining conditionally obedient to the new state officials. Mrs. Kabiri was in fact even more explicit in suggesting that “the current regime has many flaws and the clergy members in power are not entirely immune to the corruption of power and wealth.” These contradictory potentials of the original to both consolidate and open up venues to diversity is inherent to *shabih khāni*. The following detour exemplifies this very contradiction whereby the state is at once silencing divergent voices that seem unfit to its single narrative, and yet by the very appeal to the origin renders it possible for other spaces to open up. The absence of particular realities in government media urges

³⁷² For, he kept repeating that now he only followed Khameneyee and no one else in the Regime. This statement, in my view is a very clear political stance again Khatami’s cabinet who was at the time the president of Iran.

Iranians to seek alternative mediums of expression; it creates other public arenas out of private spaces; new grassroots *shabih khānis* emerge, in informal settings, with amateurish performers who nevertheless are informed by and poach the technologies and discourses of the dominant system.

From my Journal, April 7, 2004: *Mr. Mo`allem, a hospital nurse shocked me today by his sudden self-initiated story that he shared from his experience as a veteran, during the first three months when Abadan was surrounded by Iraqis. I know it is strange to admit but the reality is that having heard all these cliché heroic stories on TV, his painful experience felt refreshing. He said that the members of their troops were surrounded for days and they had nothing to eat or drink but the rotten dates on the tree and the polluted water of the river which sometimes carried dead bodies of animals and people. Most of them were very sick. In his words, “three months later when we saw a car approaching us, we were happy and did not care if the car was Iraqi or ours. We were content even to be in jail in Iraq to be fed than to remain in this deserted area without food and water in that miserable condition. Fortunately, it was our own veterans. They threw us a bag of rice, flour, and lentils. This was better than treasure for us then. Out of 65 soldiers, only 12 of us survived.”*

While I was still wondering what had invoked these memories in him, he went on to say: “Those who were injured, especially the chemically injured ones, they are the worse case scenario. They really have a tough time. Families get tired of taking care of them. People have forgotten about them and the regime doesn’t pay any attention to them. They don’t get appropriate care and feel left out.” Only now I realized that our visits of the injured people in the Bam Earthquake must have intrigued his memories of

War. Ms. Foroghi, a PhD nurse in her early thirty, in her black maghnaeh and a black chador, interrupted and said: “keep in mind that some of the high ranking officials of “Bonyād-e-Jānbāzān Foundation” (injured veterans’ Foundation) have become very rich and live in palaces.” Mr. Mo`allem agreed and added that Mohsen Rezāei, the head of the foundation is a billionaire.

Thus God spoke to me

The paradox of the relationship between the original divinity and the medium is particularly magnified at the age of totalizing nation-states and media, when the state claims to be the medium through which the original speaks and acts. The problem arises from the fact that the original is always already itself a medium, representing and representational. All confrontations are therefore around an absurd struggle to prove the originality and authenticity of the representational, always by claiming to have gotten too close to the original, and yet forbidding the same for others.³⁷³ Here lies the particularly of the modernity of the Islamic Republic that plays its own totalizing power, like other nation-states, but has to at once safeguard the original divine as inaccessible and yet present itself as one. This dilemma and the possibilities it provides are provocatively manifested in the claims of the veterans to the divinity through their dreams and premonitions.

Martyrs’ Dreams and Dreams of Martyrdom

“It was the night of the martyrdom of her highness Fatemeh-e Zahra (peace be upon her) when he said “martyrdom is near.” Mrs. Momeni, the widow of an Iran-Iraq War veteran, told this to the interviewer about her husband. The interviewer asked her.

³⁷³ Nowadays, Iranian newspapers are filled with news of arrests of those who claim to have links with the Twelfth Shi’i Imam, while Ahmadinezhad constantly claim to be in contact with Imam Zamān.

“Did he stay to see his children before leaving for the front?” “Yes,” said Mrs. Momeni. “He knew that this was the last time he was seeing us. So he stayed home for breakfast. When he woke up for the Morning Prayer and went to the kitchen to perform his ablution, I went there too. As I entered the kitchen, I noticed he had put his hands on his beard and was deeply immersed in his thoughts. I went towards him, tapped on his arm and asked: ‘Where are you?’ He said: ‘I want to tell you something.’ “What is it?” I asked. He said: ‘Last night in my dream I saw the Esmāilzādehs.’

“The Martyrs Esmāilzādehs were our neighbors, a father and a son who had both gone missing in one of the war operations and since then there had been no news about them. He said: ‘I saw in my dream that both the father and the son were the guards of Imam Hussein (peace be upon him). When I was entering the shrine of Imam Hussein (peace be upon him), they checked me in. I cannot relate the entire dream to you,’ he said, ‘I am telling you only the parts I am allowed to relate. I told the Esmāilzādehs that I had a few errands to run but that soon I will be joining them. I won’t be around to see their family. So, I want you to go to them and tell them that the Esmāilzādehs have been martyred. Tell them the news so that they no longer wait for them.’³⁷⁴

To his great astonishment, in analyzing dreams Freud discovers “that the view of dreams which came nearest to the truth was not that of the medical but the popular one.” He reckons with the “half-involved in superstition,” “popular opinion” that “dreams have a meaning, which relate to the prediction of the future” (1952:14). In Freud’s view, this prediction of future emanates from the inside of individuals. Freud’s dream world is an internal one, confined within, and representative of the latent emotions and desires of,

³⁷⁴ Excerpts are from *Chehel Roze Digar* 2003.

individuals—"a sort of *substitute* for the thought processes" (26). This dominantly Western conception delimits dreams as products of mental capacity and agentive subjectivity of dreamers. Yet, this perception falls short of explaining the dream of Mrs. Momeni's husband which I cited before. As an Iranian, Mr. Momeni sees a dream, contrary to the Westerners who dream or have a dream. By no means a mere linguistic difference, seeing a dream or having a dream or dreaming rather imply and lead to different realities and relationships to dreams. For Mr. Momeni, dreams are external phenomena. In the dream he enters into a world different from that within which he lives and dreams. The spatial and temporal boundaries of these worlds are nevertheless not impermeable. The past, present, and future and the world of the Unknown and of the earthly are rather fused with, and spill out and into, one another. The world of the dream for Mr. Momeni is a transitory liminal stage, between life and death, between earth and heaven.³⁷⁵ Through his dream, he temporarily enters into the world of the dead, into the afterlife.³⁷⁶ There, he learns of the Esmāilzādehs' deaths that have occurred in the past. He is however cognizant of his transitory situation. He recognizes his present earthly position, its tasks and obligations, and the errands he has to run before embracing his future destination, before joining the Esmāilzādehs through his own martyrdom.

For Mr. Momeni, the dream-journey is like a window that opens up to offer a glimpse of the invisible world. It momentarily reveals to him what is ahead and that which lies behind. In light of this transcending knowledge of eternity, Mr. Momeni lives

³⁷⁵ Similarly, one could assume that nightmares are windows opened to show and remind people of hell, though for some Muslims suggest that it is the journey that Satan carries the dreamer along instead of God.

³⁷⁶ One might therefore infer that dreaming is a temporary death, in which the spirit is free from the body and takes flight to the world of the invisible, to the afterlife. It reminds one of Benjamin's passage about the moment of death when the entire life of the dying person appears in front of her/his eyes like a flash back. In dreams, it is the world of afterlife that transpires in front of the dreamers' eyes.

his life in the present and has breakfast with his children for the last time for, from his dream, he has learned that “martyrdom is near.” Mr. Momeni’s conviction in the revelatory nature of dreams and their connection to the world of the Unknown is by no means an exceptional view among Iranians today. In fact, such beliefs have been indispensable, particularly to the bloody topography of post-revolutionary Iran and the massive sacrificing acts of the supporters and the dissidents of the state.³⁷⁷ In 2004, in relating her dream to me about her Marxist son’s execution in the political massacre of 1988, by the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mrs. Mahshoor conveyed a similar unwavering belief in the premonitory quality of dreams.

The night before we heard about Asghar’s execution, I saw a dream in which I had a beautiful white rooster. God was asking me to let it fly away. I pleaded with him that I had nurtured and loved it for years, but God insisted. Finally, I raised my rooster high in the sky and let it fly away. When I was awakened, I immediately knew my Asghar, my son, was martyred. So when the news of his execution came, I already knew. I was therefore rather calm. I even tried to console my family. For he was an “amānat” (trust) from God, eventually taken back by him. Since then, in all my dreams he appears happy and peaceful, always in a beautiful garden. I know that my Asghar is in paradise and those who have killed him will be going to burn in hell.

No matter whether dreams appear to dreamers or emanate from within, in light of the fact that there is no self outside of the social, their interpretations are always already confined within and informed by the languages and metaphors of their particular social context. Mr. Momeni and Mrs. Mahshoor’s shared belief in the revelatory nature of dreams, as well as their claim to martyrdom and paradise, manifest the particular religious and cultural context within which they see and subjectively interpret their dreams. Mr. Momeni’s reading of the Ismāīl-zādehs’ position as Imam Hussein’s guards,

³⁷⁷ The indispensability of dreams to self-sacrifice manifests itself in the fact that my non-planned, and yet constant encounter with their relationships compelled me to devote an entire chapter in my dissertation to dreams and the particular claims they make to sacrifices and to the Afterworld.

as an indication of their martyrdom and therefore their place in paradise, is derived from a range of collective symbols and perceptions concerning martyrs' relationship to the Shi'i Imams. The guards of Imam Hussein should be seen in the context of the state's claim that the Revolutionary Guards were members of Imam Hussein's troop. Within this shared cultural template, in Katharine Ewing's term, Mrs. Mahsoor discerns God's demand to let her rooster fly away as the calling for the return of his amānat, Asghar's life (1990).

The idea of life as an amānat which God himself gives and takes back, is manifested in a common expression in Iran: "Amanāti bood. Khodā khodesh dād, khodesham gereft," and act as familiar words of consolation, in the occasion of the loss of loved ones. In addition to the profound bearing on one's relationship and claims to life, conceiving life as an "amānat" (a kind of deposit made in trust), as I discussed earlier, also raises far more complex epistemological, philosophical, and political questions to which I cannot attend here.³⁷⁸ I have tried to show that in light of this conception and different relations to the state not merely different notions and claims to inheritance of and indebtedness to sacrifices emerge but the very notion of self-sacrifice is rendered complicated and paradoxical.³⁷⁹ We can just recall Akramis' approach to their son's death and their avoidance to grant themselves or the state any claim to it.

One's authority over a deposit is a conditional and limited one, of a keeper, of a saver. Hafiz's poem: "This body-soul that the Friend has entrusted in me, someday I will see him and return it to him" can be read in relation to the temporality of life as an

³⁷⁸ This conceptual metaphor of life as an "amānat"³⁷⁸ (a kind of deposit made in trust) operates powerfully in the Iranian Shi'i imagination and shapes the ways many people understand and live their lives.

³⁷⁹ Relating from Kenneth Burke, Clifford Geertz writes: "It makes a great deal of difference whether you call life a dream, a pilgrimage, a labyrinth, or a carnival." (1971:2).

“amānat,” though he is referring to so called natural, timely death. But what of the untimely deaths? How does one take life in one’s own hands, kill or sacrifice oneself or others, and still remain a Muslim? Beyond the state’s claim to its mediumship for the Divine, if not the original Divine itself, the haunting question of God’s utter authority seeks other responses. I suggest that dreams were, and are, the means by which many Iranian subjects sought and seek ways to legitimize their acts of self-sacrifice. Due to the contradiction between the necessity of utter submission to the Original Divine and the state’s totalizing character, which I have discussed throughout this chapter, dreams offer different potential for the dominant discourse and the subjects. It allows the subjects to assert their singular ways of asserting and contesting calls for sacrifice and yet is itself informed and can be manipulated by hegemonic discourses.

The inclination and the urge of the subjects to legitimize these untimely deaths and to reconcile the contradiction between a non-ownership to life and the agentive act of its elimination lead to claiming and assuming the knowledge of God’s call. The perception of dreams as a journey³⁸⁰ through which God reveals his will to the dreamers lends them a vital political role in relation to discourses and praxis of self-sacrifice in post-revolutionary Iran.³⁸¹ That the claim to connection to God and martyrdom, and thereby to paradise, could be asserted for someone killed by and someone killed for the state underscores the power of shared collective perceptions and metaphors as well as the

³⁸⁰ That death is also often spoken of as a journey, “safar-e-ākherat” further insinuates the relationship between death and dream.

³⁸¹ This indispensability became apparent to me very early on during my research when I realized that in almost every act of sacrifice there seemed to always palpitate a dream, a desire, for which the sacrifice was perceived to be demanded, so much so that I began to wonder about the following questions: is the dream the consequence of or the initiating element for sacrifice? How are dreams that precede sacrifices similar to or different from those that follow them? How do the dissidents and supporters of the Regime relate their dreams to these conceptions of life in relation to their differing political standing to the state and the nation?

possibility of their subjective conjectures. For Mr. Momeni and Mrs. Mahashoor, as for many Iranians, dreams are the means by which God speaks his will to them. They both respond to this call, in dreams and beyond it. While for Mr. Momeni, the possibility of deserving to be privy to such dreams is linked to his position as the supporter of the state,³⁸² Mrs. Mahshoor's connection with God through her dream aims to undermine the legitimacy of the state whose officials are to burn in hell for killing her son.

Not surprisingly, the process and the dialectics of these revelations in Mr. Momeni and Mrs. Mahshoor's dreams resemble those of the Revelation of God's Message to Mohammad, the prophet. In that Revelation, the event of crossing over of the threshold to the world of the Other occurs while Mohammad still inhabits his earthly body. The Revelation comes to Mohammad; yet for him to experience it, his spirit must ascend; it must take a flight out of his body. As tough in a middle ground, in an interception in time and space, between the world of the earthly and the heavenly God's Message meets Mohammad's spirit. In this move on either sides, a flight down from heaven and a flight out of and beyond the body towards it, the primary agentive force belongs to heaven. It is God who chooses how, when, where, and to whom to reveal his heavenly words and world. It is he who shakes the spirit out of the body and carries it along into a revelatory journey to the other world, and back to itself. The shock of this

³⁸² This connection was so vital that during the Iran-Iraq War, Khomeini and Shi'i Imams were envisioned by some veterans nearly interchangeably. The letters and last wills of many martyrs speak of Khomeini's call for their martyrdom broadcasted on radio in the same breath, if not as substitute, as their dreams or visions of angels or saints embracing them.

jolt, this journey in and out of the body, and its transcending affect, becomes manifest in the convulsion that ensues Mohammad's experience of the Revelation.³⁸³

But that Revelation appears to Mohammad does, by no stretch of imagination, imply that he is a mere transmitter, a passive vehicle of transportation, of God's Message. Rather, in the very manner by which he lives his life and becomes deserving of God's Trust, he is always already an agentive subject.³⁸⁴ Through Mohammad, God's Words descend and become accessible to human; through God's Amānat Mohammad is transcended and turned into the Prophet. Likewise, Mr. Momeni and Mrs. Mahshoor's dream is transpired to them; their spirits too fly out of and back into their bodies, also with transcending impacts. Mr. Momeni awakens to his dream immersed in his thoughts and assumes for himself a double burden of revealing to his wife the news of the past and future martyrdoms, of the Ismā'ilzādehs' and of his. Mrs. Mahshoor tries to console her secular family members of her son's eternal life in paradise, though nearly to no avail, for not all Iranians share her view of life and of dreams.

Asghar appears wandering around, unkempt, exhausted, with no resting place, in the recurring dreams of one of his sisters. In the dream of another sister he appears to be alive. "The first time I saw him in my dream," says the sister, "I asked him. Asghar are you alive? We had mourning sessions for you. 'I am alive,' he said. 'The regime is keeping me in a remote jail. It is awfully cold and dark in here.'" For yet another sister, a psychologist by profession, "the possibility for such real dreams is in our mind's power

³⁸³ The accounts of the convulsions of the martyrs either upon awakening to dreams in which they learn of their sacrifices, or the vision and the promontory knowledge they have right before their death are prevailing in the state martyrs accounts published or related by the state media.

³⁸⁴ In Mohammad, who carries the nickname the "Amin" (the trustworthy, the good trust keeper) God puts his Trust (Message).

of concentration. In sleep, free from disruptive elements, our mind gets the waves that float around.”

Yet, the conception of dream as knowledge and the source of power for consolation and salvation offers an open frontier, in Patricia Cox Miller’s words, for both the divinity and the humans to easier access one another (1988). For the families of the dissident martyrs, whose losses are not officially recognized as martyrdom by the state, dreams’ consoling impact is even more essential than for the families of the state martyrs. Assuming the reception of and submission to God’s call, these untimely deaths become blessed as martyrdom. Akin to Mohammad’s prophecy, martyrs’ salvation through revelatory dreams is also both primary to and subsequent of their status as martyrs. To become a martyr one must deserve to be chosen by God, while through martyrdom one reaches intimacy with and turns sacred. Soon to become a martyr, Mr. Momeni knows more about the afterlife than he is allowed to relate. It is of that moment before the revelation, of that not yet arrived dream, of that delicate spatial and temporal interception where the spirit and the divinity come to meet that Mr. Akbari, an imminent martyr, longingly speaks: “Where is martyrdom, where am I? I do not deserve to achieve martyrdom. I am so sinful that this blessing will not reach me.”³⁸⁵ Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, hundred thousands of self-sacrificing subjects, including Mr. Akbari, have sought to deserve martyrdom. Dreams were one of the means through which they heard God’s call and pursued salvation. Through dreams they died their untimely deaths and yet remained Muslims, the true *amānatdārs*. Dreams allowed each individual to claim: Thus God Spoke to me. But how much the charismatic leaders would be able to

³⁸⁵ Rāz-e Khormā-ye Day, 2003.

mobilize people by their *shabih khāni* of the original-representation divinity in the near future is to be seen. This largely depends on how far Iranians, especially the youth, creates new languages, metaphors, and radically novel readings of *shabih khāni*.

Chapter 7

Through the Labyrinth of Silences: Recovering the Language of Trauma

This chapter traverses different stages of translation in order to give speech back to an encrypted transliterated “text.” In the process, it will eventually revisit issues pertaining to language and translation, while all along alluding to challenges and dilemmas of translating the sociopolitical conditions of which this “text” is a product and a commentary. My ambition is also to seek ways of translating my research project not merely into a dissertation in the language of Western academia, but also to open up venues within which the two distinctive groups of martyrs’ families might communicate among themselves, to one another, and to the larger world. I am, moreover, inclined by a perhaps naïve desire and fantasy to employ language in a capacity that can go beyond itself and its limitations; that can give voice to those silences which have the potential to disrupt the boundaries of incommensurability.

Such a dream envisions the possibility of reading suffering, struggles, and artful survival of the families of these two groups of martyrs both as particular to them and also beyond. This would mean relating to these experiences more with an open heart than open eyes. Initiating such a dialogue between divergent subjects and subjectivities must all along remain wary of different dynamics of power between and within their languages. For, as with social and individual relations, the relationship between languages, as Talal Asad reminds us, is never that of equation (1993). It is, rather, always already characterized by uneven positions of power.

Moreover, as the reader will see and reckon, I will enter the discussions in this chapter through a “text” in transliteration. This is not a mere stylistic choice for me but

also an analytical tool. On the one hand, I have deployed this opening as a literary metaphor to work through dynamics of and relationships between languages and their translation into one another. On the other hand, to communicate the silenced histories of Iranian subjects, I have taken up the process of freeing this transliterated “text” from the enclave of its quotation mark as a conceptual metaphor. Through this process of offering speech to this mute “text,” I hope to give voice to these realities that have gone mute behind the confines of the dominant narrative that has stopped to speak to many Iranians.

A “text” in transliteration occupies a state of suspension in which words are lost to their native language and do not say anything meaningful in the foreign letters. It is a stage at which communication has come to a halt.³⁸⁶ For the very “troubled consciousness of modern thought,” of which Rosalind Morris, citing Foucault reminds us, “emerges with the generalization of the commodity form, one in which language has become a matter of exchanging and words” (Morris 2000: 18).³⁸⁷ Transliteration, to use Victor Turner’s term, is a mode of “liminality” in which, devoid of its own body, the “text” haunts the body of the foreign (1967, 1969, and 1974), but has not yet become eligible in its new state.³⁸⁸ The Farsi words in Latin letters remain burdensome and

³⁸⁶ In transliteration, the “text” resembles Peircian Firstness where cosigns have not yet grown into signifiers (1992). In transliteration, the text is a potential, unpredictable and unrecognized.

³⁸⁷ This “troubled consciousness” is anchored in the very inevitability of the fact that for the language to communicate, its signs must signify. And yet “like money,” words “have come to derive their value from their ‘pure functions as sign’ (Morris, 2000). Without words functioning as signs, they carry no value. They are not even words. If, as Morris suggests, “translation is marked by the fact of identity’s absence” (Morris, 2000: 18-9), then transliteration is characterized by the sign’s apparent absence.

³⁸⁸ In this liminal stage, the object is separated from the word but the word has not yet replaced the object. In relation to disconnection between the signifier and what it signifies, Paul Willis explains how, for instance the cow to which the word cow refers is forgotten and that the signifiers “are arbitrary” and “in theory could be absolutely anything” (2000:15). But no matter how arbitrary signifiers might be and how much the objects they signify might be forgotten as actual things, for the language to communicate, the words should stand for particular objects, in their absence.

wasteful. Only by giving them a voice, in translation, they might be brought back into circulation and communication. In transliteration, they will only speak to those who can travel in and out of, and inhabit, both languages, Farsi and English. A Farsi text written in Latin alphabets is accessible only to a Farsi speaker who is familiar with Latin letters and an English speaker who understands Farsi. For all others, transliteration is like a vacated and vacant body. The “words” remain silent, as if already dead, ghostly, even though they still occupy the familiar body of Latin letters. Via excavating different layers of our “text,” in the following pages we will journey through the labyrinth of languages and the problematics of their opening up to one another as well as the conditions under which they come to mean what they mean to different people.

The first layer (The literal, innocent, and ignorant translation)

Az yeh razmandeh khāstan khāterātesho rājah beh jebheh begeh.
goft: har shab bā ārezo beh rakhtekhāb miraftim; bā sahar bidāar
mishodim; bā sepideh beh `amaliyyāt miraftim, b`ad man simāro
lokht mikardam, va Hāji ham miparid ro minā.

A war veteran was asked to talk about his memories of the front.
He said: every night we went to bed with the wish-desire, were
awakened at dawn, and went to the operation at early morning.
Then, I stripped off the wires and Hāji jumped over the mines.

The above translation offers a literal and yet deceitful reading of the “text.” It deludes the reader, if not intentionally then at least because of the chasm that resides between the conventional and the sociocultural ambiguity of signifiers, as well as between and within languages. This “faithful” and literal translation ironically conceals the tricky nature of language and eventually the real intention of the above text. It presents the words’ “meanings,” but ignores their unsettled connotations. It employs signifiers without cognizance of their ambivalent function and the “falsely premised”

fantasy of their “actual substitutability.” But this “dream of absolute contingency,” as Rosalind Morris suggests, “is haunted by the possibility that difference will return, by the fact that difference takes the form of haunting” (2000: 18-9). In translation between languages, the inherent problem of “identity’s absence” is even more salient.

By ignoring this haunting difference, the above translation provides a misleadingly “expected” and “logical” account of the front. In the absence of a translator and an informant, in whom a simultaneous foreign and native cohabits, one might perhaps remain content with this “deceitful” translation. In post-revolutionary Iran, many Iranian children of dissidents have been subjected to such deceptions and secrecy, even by their own loved ones. These “innocent” deceptions do not even include, though are often the result of, those malicious mendacities of the hegemonic forces that intentionally offer a selective translation of the recent history of Iran, by silencing particular voices in favor of others. One of the most blunt manifestations of such silencing and distorted translation is embodied in the “Museum of Information” (Mozeh-ye-Ettelā`at). This “museum” used to be a detention center for political prisoners under the Shah and the Islamic Republic as late as the 1990s and early 2000s and was opened to the public as a museum in 2004.³⁸⁹ In a bluntly discriminatory translation of its history, the museum

³⁸⁹ Under the Shah, this detention center was titled “The Anti Sabotage Shared Committee” (Komiteh-ye-Moshtarak-e-zedd-e-Kharābkāri). Under the Islamic Republic it became the “Divine Unity Committee” (Komiteh-ye-Touhid) or “Committee 3000” (Komiteh-ye-3000). During my stay in Iran in 2003-4, one had to call ahead of time and ask for the day and the time and the numbers of people for visit and leave one’s name. Even though we were not asked for any identification card upon our visit, but at the time, when I called, I assumed they would. Anyways, in this recently become museum, first of all, the entire history of its usage under the Islamic Republic is completely left silent. The selective portrayal of its function under the Shah is mainly limited to display of torture and its means. The actual human size statues in the solitary confinement are made only of those former inmates who are under the Islamic Republic were the high ranking government officials under the Islamic Republic, mostly clergy members, or the religious martyrs. The youngsters who were brought in groups from high schools could have gotten no sense that in fact this detention center was mainly populated by the leftist prisoners many of whom were killed under torture in this now museum either under the Shah or the Islamic Republic.

erases the presence of the leftists while it gives the suffering and resistance of religious prisoners an exclusive and exaggerated attention. Yet, I am herein concerned with more “banal deceptions,” which while are often the outcomes of those graver fraudulences, in relation to our particular task in hand, have come about because of the innate limitations in translating sociopolitical conditions.

Yet, it is important to keep in mind the impacts of such malicious conditions on the lives of many Iranian dissident families during the 1980s who felt compelled to conceal the realities of their lives not only to the public, but also to their own young children. This chapter will only hint at the consequences of such deceptions for those children of the inmate or executed dissidents who were forced to live with these deceptive translations. Some lived with grandmothers disguised as their mothers, as did Hedyeh and Āzad, with uncles who played the role of fathers, like those of Āzadeh and Noshin, or heard of the execution (e`dām) of their father but were told that he had been sent away (e`zām) for research, in Damāvand’s case. These numerous deceptions were often used to protect the children or the entire family from harassment, arrest, and emotional problems. In this deceitful translation, as that of the first reading of the above “text,” titles and words are present, but meanings are distorted.

Deception also characterized the children of the War veterans’ relationship to society. Due to the increasing disillusionment of the people with the state and with the families of martyrs as “state beneficiaries,” especially in recent years, the children of these families often hide their “identity” as the families of state martyrs.³⁹⁰ But again the “inaccuracy” of our above text has primarily to do with the relation of translation, in

³⁹⁰ This secrecy is however more flexible and is often revealed when the revelation bestows them with privileges, for instance while seeking jobs or trying to enter universities in which seeking martyrs’ quota is a huge plus.

Benjamin's words, to the intention or "intentio" of the original text (1968:79). The new effort in translation will aim at undoing this failure to convey the intention of the original text.

The Second Layer: (the Semi-literal Translation-substitution)

Har shab bā ārezo beh rakhtekhāb miraftim; bā sahar bidār
mishodim; bā sepideh beh `amaliyyāt miraftim, b`ad man simāro
lokht mikardam, va Hāji ham miparid ro minā.³⁹¹

Every night we went to bed with ārezo (the desire, the wish); were awakened with³⁹² sahar (dawn); went to the operation with sepideh (dawn, first light in the morning, early morning); then I stripped off (undressed) simā, (the wires), and Hāji jumped over minā (the mines).

By a minor change of the preposition from "at" to "with," which is how it is originally phrased in Farsi, something like the shadow of a ghost begins to gesture its appearance behind this version of translation. That the veteran says he and Hāji woke up "with early morning" (bā sahar) not "at or in early morning" (dar sahar") and that they went to operation "with dawn" (bā sepideh) rather than "at dawn (dar sepideh) indicates something that for a Farsi speaker is already revealing. For an English reader, though suggestive, it still remains in the dark.³⁹³ The difference between the two versions of the translation here is anchored in the concept of loyalty in translation about which Talal Asad too cites Benjamin. "The language of a translation can and in fact must let itself go, so that it gives voice to the intentio [intention] of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of intentio" (quoted in Asad 1993: 189).

³⁹¹ From here on I will be omitting the first part "they asked a veteran..." and mention what he has supposedly said.

³⁹² The underlined italics emphasize the mutated, substituted words.

³⁹³ For an imaginative Farsi Speaker, the hidden secret might begin to be revealed, already at this stage.

In order to remain true to English, our first version of translation had refused to bend its grammatical rules. This refusal led it to reach the intention of the original text. But as Asad suggests, “all good translation seeks to reproduce the structure of an alien discourse within the translator’s own language” and as such any translation is a matter of a “harmonious substitution” rather than an “equation” (Asad, 1993: 189). The curious reality of translation is that to be faithful to one language, one has to always, at least to some extent, betray the other. In translation, and with life, one always deals with sacrifices. The question is who or what should be sacrificed for whom or for what? For, are not life and language inherently sacrificial?

Thus, in the second phase, by shifting to the native structure, the existing possibilities of the colloquial Farsi and its quite flexible utilization of propositions paves the way for a play on words and a selective maneuvering among propositions. That in formal speech in Farsi, one might easily use “at” or “with” interchangeably and even omit propositions altogether³⁹⁴ so that all the following statements: we were awakened “with early morning” (bā sahar),” or “at early morning” (dar sahar) or simply “early morning” (sahar) are considered grammatically accurate is the ground on which jokes function. Omissions or minor mutations of letters and words are crucial techniques for the creation of jokes. By its deliberate choice of “with,” instead of “at,” our joke feeds on and makes manifest the inherent ambivalence and power of language in creating new worlds. Like the brief anecdotes that I will be discussing in this chapter which, while suggestive, are insufficient to depict their deeper complexity, the substitutions at this

³⁹⁴ Even in formal Farsi writing, one might phrase them in all the three ways, with “at,” “with” or without either.

phase allude to a possibility but still leave it hidden beneath or between lines. Further excavation is necessary to reach the deeper layer of meaning.

The Third Layer: Doubling, Replacement

Har shab bā ārezo beh rakhtekhāb miraftim; bā sahar bidār
mishodim; bā sepideh beh `amaliyyāt miraftim, b`ad man simāro
lokht mikardam, va Hāji ham miparid ro minā

Every night we slept with ārezo-*Arezo*, were awakened with
sahar-*Sahar*, went to the operation with sepideh-*Sepideh*; then I
stripped off (undressed) simā -*Simā*, and Hāji-*haji* jumped over
minā-*Minā*.

This new version of translation suddenly brings us face to face with new characters, with doubles. Like the woman who unexpectedly appears from the closet of the magician as he cuts it into half, the doubling of these words also appears unexpectedly. The surprise of this sudden transpiration of the doubles would feel shocking if the reader is informed that all the words of the above pairs, which begin with capital letters, are trendy, non-religious Iranian female names. This knowledge introduces the reader to an entirely new translation in which the fashionable young women, *Arezo*, *Sahar*, *Sepideh*, are about to utterly transform our veteran's account of the war. These women, who were already present in the Farsi version, had gone missing behind their new mask, in their writing in the English alphabet.

The mother already resided in the body of Minā, a leftist woman inmate, whom Hedyeh visited in jail for years, till one day she called her Minā. All of a sudden, like the woman out of a magician's closet, the mother came out. "Why do you call me Minā? Why don't you call me mom?" Minā- the mother asked Hedyeh. Only then, the mother and the daughter learned that they had been living a lie; that the daughter had been led to think of her grandmother as her mother. And this nice lady, Minā, whom Hedyeh had

convinced herself (perhaps unconsciously and wishfully) was just a relative or a friend, was suddenly claiming to be her mother. Although shocking, but also ironic, it was as though Hedyeh had known it all along; as though she was unconsciously participating in her grandmother's deception to protect herself from the pain, as was the grandmother's intention.

But, as in our joke, here as well, the calling of the proper name revealed the long kept secret and reunited the mother and the daughter, albeit with great confusion. Hedyeh had to now make sense of her relationship and her feelings for a woman behind bars, now as her mother, and of her grandmother, who had just till then been her mother. As angry as Hedyeh was at this fake mother, the grandmother had meant no harm in lying to them. It was a deception out of love and fear for her family, in response to sociopolitical limitation that did not allow a transparent translation. Like a secret code, the proper name had, however, summoned the mother out.

This phase of translation of the text similarly performs a “sh`obadeh bāzi” (a magician's trick) through which doubles transpire from that space of “identity's absence” in the haunting difference in Farsi and English writing. Within this space, the ghosts hibernate until the very magic of translation—the very magic that had hidden them within the maze of languages—calls them out. The trick of concealing and revelation works because in the Farsi alphabet, there are no capital letters to distinguish proper names from nouns. The letter “ā” in ārezo (the wish-desire)³⁹⁵ contains within it the “Ā” of the Ārezo (a proper trendy name for a female). The “ārezo”(the desire-the wish) and the young trendy woman, Ārezo, coexist in “آرزو,” in a single word-body. The same is true of the

³⁹⁵ Even though the wish, desire, and fantasy do not mean the same thing in English, the term ārezo can imply all the three meanings. From now on, I will therefore use them interchangeably.

other letters such as “s” and S,” in the beginnings of sahar and Sahar which are both contained in the term سحر, as sepideh and Sepideh are united in سپید • or simā and Simā in سیمā. and finally minā and Minā in مینā.

Each of these couplets of nouns and proper female names,³⁹⁶ which reside in a single body, is cut in half by the hammer of translation. Unlike Farsi, where the mind’s eye imagines the erotic women and the solemn nouns in the same blink, in English, their separation has to become externally visible for the mind to pursue these two possibilities. In translation, ambivalence has to be erased from the sight so that the other can emerge. Transpiration of ghost-women, in this unexpected space of rationality creates unease and is unsettling. In their double signification in Farsi, these words host the “innocence” of the nouns and the temptation and seductive energy of the young women. This potential of coexistence allows for the gravity of war memories to turn into erotic jokes, and yet remain in relation to its memories. Unlike the English version, in Farsi, the presence of one does not nullify the other. In fact, each part of the pair remains in relationship with and informs the other. It is this very possibility that renders jokes such an indispensable commentary on the sociopolitical milieu of Iranian culture. In English, sacrifice is necessary to divide the world of the sacred from that of the profane, to remain faithful to binary opposition created and guarded by the enlightenment.³⁹⁷ By unmasking our women-ghosts through the separation of the doubles, an entirely new text emerges.

³⁹⁶ Proper names reveal a great deal about the class, gender and even age of these women. Someone familiar with the sociopolitical and cultural meaning of proper names in Iran can assume with great accuracy that Ārezo, Sahar, and Sepideh are young, middle class, non-religious women.

³⁹⁷ This risky claim I am making here reminds me of Payām’s firm belief, which was shared by many intellectuals in Iran, that “our country has not gone through Renaissance and Enlightenment processes and therefore we have no clear sense of self and other, individual and collective, and private and public; in their views, these lacks were the main reasons for our country’s uneven and messed up progress towards a “real” modernity.” But I by no means adhere to the same view.

Every night we went to bed with Ārezo,³⁹⁸ were awakened with Sahar, went to the “operation” with Sepideh; then I stripped off (undressed) Simā, and hāji jumped over Minā.

This replacement, which is in fact a displacement of the war account, discloses the text as a joke, a joke that was hidden by the limitations of translation, and is released as if it were a genie coming out of the bottle. Through this trickery, from under the surface of an “innocent,” commonsensical, and rational war account exudes the transgressive, deviant, and the absurd joke.³⁹⁹ The appearance of the doubles is unsettling for, like the ever-present survivor, witness dead martyrs, the war memories live on in the very space of their shattered reality in the joke. This reminds me of Hasan’s father, a state martyr who communicates with his son from his grave, no longer about martyrdom but rather about his son’s college choices. Stories such as this one, that Hasan told me in 2003, are abundantly heard on Iranian television.⁴⁰⁰

Of The Dilemma of Sacrificial Translation of the Jokes

Even though, at this stage of translation, both the ghosts and the joke are freed, their eroticism and laughter have dried up in this long journey towards freedom. One is

³⁹⁸ The names in Iran are usually chosen for the children to imply something meaningful for the family. They are either the names of the religious, epical, or family figures, or are taken from nature, or are particular adjectives or nouns. A family who names their son as Omid (hope) is often expressing the hope they have invested in him, or that they hope his coming to life will bring happiness and fortune into their life. The daughters are named Ārezo to express the family’s wish or desire for a particular future for themselves and/or their daughter. The names reveal many secrets about the family including their religious inclinations. The distinction between the names of the children of the dissident group and the other is marked and profoundly telling, in most cases. The non-matching names of my siblings and I are the marker of the battle between my father’s taste for “modern Persian” names and my paternal grandmother’s favor for religious ones. Their different opinions and the extent to which they were able to assert their power in imposing their taste is translated into our names.

³⁹⁹ In English, each element of the pair is independent from one another; they diverge, as though in accordance with a more individualistic system, in which a person is more distinguished than the world in which she or he lives. The proper name thus inhabits the “capital case” while the noun is settled down in that of the lower. This clear distinction resembles the guarded gates of the rich neighborhoods to which the poor find no entry, unless by breaking the law.

⁴⁰⁰ There are numerous programs on television about martyrs in which the families of martyrs talk about their continuous relationship with the martyrs, as if they were present in their lives.

reminded of the utopian dreams of revolutions which, after all the sacrifices, so easily die away and leave behind a sense of betrayal and disillusionment in their stead.⁴⁰¹ The loss of the jubilant effects of the joke, due to the elongated process of translation, brings to mind the inevitability of hell that lives in revolutions, as Milan Kundera suggests, alongside, not after or instead of, paradise. This lengthy process, through which the joke was released from the boundaries and rules of languages, evidently compromised the common charming concision necessary to the joke to sustain its “tactical” qualities, the sharp punch of the punch line. This is very similar to writing ethnography in that the very attempt to give voice to its subjects and to convey the complexity and vibration of the society might end up reducing them to objects of study. Likewise, in the process of opening up the space within which the joke could be deciphered, the sharp edges of its transgressive and terse attributes are dulled. Caught in the labyrinth of languages, the humor of the joke is “drunk by the ghosts”, like Kafka’s kisses in his letters to his lover on their way in the mail (Quoted in Mrázek, 1997: 4). This loss is critical for Iranians, for whom humor is an essential aspect of daily life which is so intensely intertwined with traumatic and violent events.

Interwoven with language, jokes are commodities that are spoiled if, in Freud’s terms, they fall outside of “physical conformity” (1963: 184). Like any other commodity, jokes also have to be desired and produce new fantasies. The economy of time and labor and the devotion of capital are essential to their circulation, along with other complex

⁴⁰¹ In a poem titled “Sacred Word,” Ahmad Shamloo beautifully describes this contradictory relation between pursuing a goal and the pain that one goes through to achieve it. He writes “They had told us that ‘we would teach you the Sacred Word, but in order to learn it you have to endure grave consequences. For so long we endured the grave hardship that we forgot the “Sacred Word.”

elements of the market economy.⁴⁰² In a sense, the more at home one is with the “culture” of a joke, the less work it would entail for the punch line to hit home, and thus the more affected one would be by its “liberating and elevating” impact (ibid).⁴⁰³ The pleasure of jokes is accomplished, as Freud points out, “by saving in expenditure of the emotional affect” (Freud, 1963: 263). Jokes are thus keen to reduce the outlay of both their production and consumption. As though renovating a building with old and already available materials, in driving their point home, jokes often apply the slightest mutations possible. As “particular forms of humor” which are attentive to the economy of expenditure, the “relatively short narratives” of jokes hit their customer with unexpected revelations (Berger 1995: 11).

Thus, translating a joke contradicts this very “liberating and elevating” affect, the “saving of the emotional expenditure.” To keep the laughter of the joke hanging in the air and to conceal its secret for too long betrays its purpose. It is like the loss of the motherhood of Mahvash, a leftist inmate, due to the longevity of her imprisonment. The kindness with which she had treated her young fellow inmates, as if she were their mothers, did not find its way to her son, to whom her motherhood was offered too late.

The pain of separation of all those years had sunk so deep into her son’s psyche that her

⁴⁰² Freud describes the conditions that he suggests makes it possible to laugh at a joke. According to Freud, “it is essential that he [the audience of the joke] should be in sufficient physical accord with the first person to possess [the teller of the joke] the same internal inhibitions, which the joke-work has overcome in the latter. A person who is responsive to smut will be unable to derive any pleasure from witty jokes of exposure... Thus every joke calls for a public of its own and laughing at the same joke is evidence of far-reaching physical conformity. Here moreover we arrived at a point which enables us to guess still more precisely what takes place in the third person. He must be able as a matter of habit to erect in himself the same inhibition which the first person’s joke has overcome, so that, as soon as he hears the joke, the readiness for this inhibition will compulsively or automatically awaken. This readiness for inhibition, which I must regard as a real expenditure, analogous to mobilization in military affairs, will at the same moment be recognized as superfluous or too late, and so be discharged in *statu nascendi* by laughter (1963: 184-185).

⁴⁰³ This is however not always the case; being too close to the issues with which the joke plays might engender resistance to it.

return was incapable of producing any joy for him. The mother returned only after the son had finally found another woman to love as his mother, Mahvash's sister. Time had created new desires and interests; the trace of the "original" mother was lost to the son, while the "unreal" mother and son had grown closer to one another and created their own new reality. In this new reality, Mahvash was lost both to her son and to her own motherhood and, therefore, to herself. Like the laughter of a joke that might die out with time, for Mahvash, these losses led to the loss of meaning of life, thus to suicide and death.

To prolong the telling of a joke is to miss its momentum, the punch of its punch line, like holding on to a commodity until it loses the demand of the market and thus its value. *It is like the first ice cream that Bahāreh, a three year old "inmate" was given by her grandfather on her first day after she left jail, leaving her mother behind to be killed at the hand of the regime. On that hot summer day, Bahāreh held on to her first ice cream and the pleasure of that first experience for so long, perhaps to savor the taste of its first bite, that it melted and slipped through her fingers. Regret replaced delight.*

Jokes and Dreaming to Forget the Loss

Jokes, like dreams, are always translations and thus are born of loss. They are the offspring of trauma, the indicators of its resilience and the very possibility of being caught in and yet the very hope to move out of it. As with translation and with language as translation, both jokes and dreams give with one hand and take away with another; they offer a voice and yet are estranged from it. In Freud's intriguing terms, the question concerning jokes and their production of laughter has to do with the "readiness of inhibition" which in his words is analogous to "military mobilization" that is always

recognized as excessive and yet as having occurred too late. This excessive and belated quality is also characteristic of trauma. In this sense, translation, in general, and the translation of jokes, in particular, which is inherently of and about loss, is therefore always already intertwined with trauma, time, and language.

The loss of the joke in and to time resembles the recent history of violence in Iran, in which an entire community of dissidents is massacred, forced into exile or into silence. With their stories so persistently erased, with the past that so rapidly drifts by in the face of new horrors, many of the survivors have come to perceive the invocation of their past as futile for other Iranians who have had their own share of disasters and violence. In their attempt to avoid self-victimization or self-indulgence, some of these dissidents end up silencing their own stories.

There are those who throw themselves in disastrous situations to help others, partially to forget their own traumas (like Mones and Behnāz). Others avoid even getting close to anything that reminds them of their past. “I don’t want to touch anything that can make me sad,” Hāleh told me when she tried to explain to me why she could not continue talking with me about her past. Still, Nāser was one of those, who having lost his first wife to execution and the second one to cancer a few years after her release from years of imprisonment, told me that the “only way to survive his fatal sadness” was by staying away from “adults and their serious discussions.” The only joy, he said, he nowadays found in life was his preoccupation with literature. “I especially like translating from other languages. I also love to spend time with kids and the youngsters,” he told me.

When I asked Nāser what is it in the younger generation that makes the relationship with them desirable for him, he immediately said: “their lightheartedness,

their capacity to laugh and ridicule, their ability to live non-seriously, and their talent to make jokes out of everything, even life.” I had heard from many of the young people with whom I became friends during my recent stay in Iran about this gravity and seriousness that they found suffocating. Nahāl, a young woman in her early 20s, told me about this dilemma of avoiding depression and her parents’ difficulty in relating to her.

My mom and dad constantly complain about the kinds of friends I have. They keep saying why I find these “shoot” (superficial) people as friends. No matter how many times I have tried to explain to them that I’ve had enough sadness in my life and that I am an easy prey for depression if I don’t watch out. I choose friends who make me laugh. You know I can’t even listen to sad music. This drives my mom crazy that I am always listening to dancing rhythms but these superficial joys are essential for me to survive sinking deep into depression. Why do you think I broke up with my boyfriend who was such a nice guy? He was too serious for me. It was making me depressed. Laughter is my anti-depressant. I wish my mom could understand this.

Like dreams and memories, jokes too can become outdated, or try to superimpose themselves on bitter memories. In this sense, they resemble unacknowledged sacrifices and lost gifts that continue haunting from beneath the surface. The tension in the reception of jokes and the different relationship to these jokes find their sociopolitical reflections in the conflicting responses to the status and memorialization of state martyrs. While hyper-memorialization of state martyrs has engendered resentment among many Iranians who have come to consider the state’s portrayal of martyrs as acrimonious, exaggerated, and manipulated, there are others who see ignoring martyrs as a “betrayal” (*khiyānat*). According to this view, reinforced by the official discourse, this forgetting means “wasting the blood of martyrs” (*pāymāl kardan-e –khoon-e-shuhadā*).

But as with jokes and gifts, sacrifices do not always induce gratitude; nor are they necessarily perceived by everyone as desirable gifts. In fact, in today’s Iran, they are

frequently seen as imposed burdens, as violent or selfish acts, especially by the executed political dissidents' children, who often speak of their parents' sacrificial deaths either as idiotic or selfish. In Payām's words, "my father did not have the right to bring me into this world and then choose to die as if he were on his own." For Payām, his leftist dissident father

was selfish to choose his beliefs over his children. Such a brilliant engineer could have provided me a great future. But now see where I am and how my friends are living driving their expensive foreign cars and here I am constantly fighting with my mom over my daily expenses. This is because my father was so stubborn that he could not bend to the regime and save his life for the sake of his family.⁴⁰⁴

Many among the younger generation of Iranians perceive the untimely deaths from the Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, as a waste of life, the fruit of which, in Payām's words, "was nothing but pain, misery, recession, and erosion of social freedom."

The Relationship between the Martyrs' Jokes and the Official Narrative

Against the view that considers sacrificial deaths as gifts of lives that burdens the survivors with debt and expectations to return, in Payām's view, his father's death is a "poisonous gift."⁴⁰⁵ Like sacrifices and gifts, jokes too present themselves in ceremonious rituals. They also demand response and oblige their return, the least of which is the laughter they expect upon their reception. They too stir up dislikes or disturbances, as undesired or unexpected gifts might invoke. In a way jokes are a kind of gift themselves and, as with gifts, they are not immune to violence. They are often reactions to or substitutes for violent experiences. As with gifts, they too often impose

⁴⁰⁴ The dilemma of responding to a particular call of responsibility and the inevitable sacrifice of other responsibilities is the subject of an intriguing discussion in Derrida's "Gift of Death."

⁴⁰⁵ It is important to note that this very view would entirely turn around if Payām senses disrespect to his father by the state authority. There is a connection to this idea of martyrdom that remains deep in the heart of most Iranians.

themselves on their receivers with the intention to humiliate, to put down, to obligate, to burden, to agitate, and to offend. Also like gifts, to appreciate a joke one must immediately recognize its implications, yet at once remember and forget the original and the substituted in a joke. It requires the “readiness” to untangle its multifarious meanings, for a strenuous labor would spoil its “saving expenditure of affect,” and turn it into a burdensome gift. Again, *the specter of martyrdom returns to haunt us, even here in the midst of our endeavor on humor, on a joke.*

To return a joke is not only to give its laughter back, but is to reproduce laughter by its dissemination and by new offerings. But to properly receive and return a joke without recognizing its reception and repayment one must be at home with the context and language of the joke. It entails being immersed not only in the stories and histories of the losses out of which the jokes are born, but of the possible loss of the jokes. And yet, to receive a gift, a joke, and a sacrifice, one must also be a stranger to them. As with transliteration, unleashing the laughter hidden in jokes also demands multi-positionality. To understand the genre of jokes of which the joke in this chapter is an example, one must walk on and yet stand outside the soil within and out of which these jokes have grown and spread out. As with transliterated “text,” for an absolute native and an absolute foreign, the joke would remain mute. It is in my multi-positionality that I have come to perceive this particular genre of jokes about state martyrs as an elucidatory manifestation of the confrontation with, transgression from, and counter-representations of the official history, but also a product and a response to trauma.

In their mocking attitude towards the official narratives about state martyrs, these jokes provide a venue for alternative readings of history and open up a possibility for

remembrance beyond the imposed official memory; they urge people to question established values and taboos. They set themselves apart as a new attitude of youth, against the somber, monotonous, and authoritative discourses. To what extent this attitude and its language might succeed in creating a space for the writing of a new story of recent past, depends on a variety of factors. At one level, it depends on the extent to which these jokes reach and unsettle not merely the official narratives, but the dynamics and modes within which such narratives function. Seeking new ways of seeing and being, rather than polemically reacting and hence perpetuating established discourses, is crucial to the jokes' destabilizing quality.

Jokes and their dissemination, in general, and this genre of jokes about martyrs in post-revolutionary Iran, in particular, are more than mere gifts-commodities of pleasure. They, rather, raid and shake the foundation of "sacred realities," which are so tightly guarded by taboos and authorities. In this sense, these jokes are a means to shatter the guarded worlds of hegemonic discourses, which are hardly approachable by direct intervention. For me, the anthropologist, they were the kind of "informants" who guided me to the unconventional spaces which normally are nearly impossible to enter or tackle. They revealed as much, if not more, about the pain and trauma of the world in which the disseminators of these jokes lived than about the intricate ways in which laughter might help them to work through and out of trauma.

Interestingly, like *shabih khāni*, the potential of jokes, as that of dreams, has to do with their "subordinate" and marginal position in relation to official discourses. As "mere" dreams or "mere" jokes, they are at once undermined and allowed to live like "nomadic readers, by raiding and poaching official territories" (de Certeau, 1984). Yet,

humor, as do *shabih khāni* (Karbala Commemorative reenactment which also means reading similar) and dreams, often surpasses its assumed boundaries. All three forms float around and extend their impact onto real life. Like *shabih khāni* which is impregnated with the possibility of too perilous transgression, jokes also keep the red flag swinging in the air, as if signaling a glimpse of the world in which structures of power no longer hold. As Freud suggests, humor is by no means resigned; it is rather “rebellious,” and has “a liberating element,” “something fine and elevating, which is lacking in the other two ways of deriving pleasure from intellectual activity [wit and comic]” (1963: 265).

Freud refers to this elevating quality of humor as “the triumph of narcissism, the ego’s victorious assertion of its own invulnerability.” It is the victory of the ego, according to Freud, which “refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer” (1963: 265). This refusal to be hurt by the arrow of reality seeks pleasure against painful realities, in Freud’s term “by saving in expenditure of affect” (1963:263). While, as any social products, jokes also refuse to lend themselves to a single interpretation-formulation, but the aforementioned elements of Freud’s discussion of humor are not hard to be traced in our joke. We are about to come to the end of our excavation of the layers of the message, but the interpretation of our findings is yet another story.

The Revenge of the Joke

Every night we went to bed with *ārezo-Ārezo*, were awakened with *sahar-Sahar*, went to the operation (or had intercourse) with *sepideh-Sepideh*; then I stripped off (undressed) *simā-Simā*, and Hāji jumped over *minā-Minā*.

Let's recall that in English, the pairs stood separate from one another, with the proper names distinguished by the capital letters. In a world already compartmentalized and individualized, the undivided characters in Farsi seem to confirm the Orientalist anticipation for the specters of "primitivism" to emerge. Our joke has found its free terrain in the lacuna between these apparently different worlds, as if the primitive has survived to haunt the modern.⁴⁰⁶ And yet, the ghosts of the joke are "ghosts of modernity" dressed in old customs, in a language that still carries the depleted traces of an already vanished world, where the currency and goods had not yet become totally separated. It is as if, in Farsi, the wheat is used both as the equivalence for exchanging goods and as a product itself. But in English, not only wheat but gold and money are already diverged; the coin looks like the gold but it no longer functions as gold, rather as currency.⁴⁰⁷ For our joke to enter into a relation of equivalence in these two worlds of different rules and standards of exchange, it has to break some laws and boundaries.

Yet, as with the exorcism of the specters which enlightenment undertook as one of its essential tasks, which Adorno and Horkheimer argue ended up not only generating new ghosts but resurrecting the old ones under new disguises, this division does not

⁴⁰⁶ It reminds one of Peitz's definition of fetish in which he suggests that only in contact between two historical and cultural moments could the fetish take on the meaning it did (1985). Here, as well, neither in English, with its division between subjects and nouns, nor in Farsi, before the anticipation of that separation, could the joke come to existence in such a "natural" way. It is the space of transition and liminality within which the joke is born.

⁴⁰⁷ The analogy I am using here is not totally ungrounded. It is not only somewhat perceived by the western Orientalist approach to the "Middle Eastern" people, languages and cultures, including of course Iran, but also is the dominant line of argument by most intellectuals in Iran. In addition to the prevalence of the scholarly work that perceives of Iran as a less modern, and less enlightened country, many of the individuals with whom I worked closely on this project shared the same views. Payām, one of the young informants, a son of an executed dissident father and a former political inmate mother, repeatedly argued that "Iran has not gone through a Renaissance or Enlightenment and that is why individuality and private sphere is so messed up in here." Mr. Hāshemi a sociology professor also suggests that "in Iran we do not yet even have specifics term distinguishing streets and avenues as the English speakers do. The reason," he inferred, "is that we still lack the concept of private and public sphere that is so imperative to modernity and progress." The ideas of the west are well-integrated and internalized in these perceptions.

prevent ghostly emergences; it rather renders the encounter with them somewhat uncanny. Like martyrs who live side by side with the living, in our joke in Farsi, abstract nouns live in the same body as the women, as if always already harboring the very possibility of betrayal of sacrifices of lives and sacrifices of languages. Like martyrs, these jokes seek revenge for the untimely losses and deaths and mitigate the enduring pain inflicted on their offspring.

This revenge is undertaken in the very language that authority so compulsively guards. The twilight of language is the very matrix of transgression for the jokes, the ambivalent locale of thresholds within which phantoms reside. In language, in its widest sense that encompasses the expressions of body and body politics, and in its fissures and in-flexibilities, these disruptive contraventions occur. Within this language, the highly venerated tenets of the “Holy War-Holy Defense” and its “sacred martyrs” are subverted in jokes such as this one. By the manipulation of the ambivalence and absurdity of the signifiers, the joke cunningly plays with and divides the single body as if breaking apart the single official narrative and its body politics. It is through the verbal hammer of the language of the joke that the “normative” mores of the war and its official accounts are unsettled. Through this game of uniting and dividing the couples, the tabooed sexual fantasies come out of the closet.

The Joke of the Veil, the Veil of the Joke

In the sudden and unexpected appearance of these women and erotic desires in the midst of and from beneath an apparently serious war account, the joke drops its punch line, as if a bomb, or like the shock of an earthquake.⁴⁰⁸ The production and

⁴⁰⁸ From the joke about the American rescue dog surprising and driving the attention of the rescue theme by pouring dirt on a spot and their realization that it was a clergyman buried there, to the joke about

transformations of such jokes are closely attuned to the sociopolitical dynamics, temperament, and changes in Iranian society. In this sense, these jokes seem to be miming the twists and turns of the society, which in 2003-4 seemed to be moving away from and yet back to the somber ambiance and harsh realities of the early years of post-revolutionary Iran. The serious and often gloomy mood with which these jokes began, both in form and content, suddenly lightened up and revealed their mockery and humor, in the process mirroring the very transforming social modalities in Iran.

These jokes seem to echo the movement towards greater ambiguities in the structures of power, particularly those of Khatami era, which upheld apparently less rigid social codes of conduct than those of the early years following the 1979 Revolution. The massive and persistent transgressions urged the government to loosen up its regulatory policies at the same time that the jokes also pushed the boundaries of the tabooed issues to create a lighter and a less mystified environ within which these issues came to be debated. The playful manner in which the sacred topics and rules of propriety were vilified by the startling yet slightly subversive behavior of these youngsters is also represented, reflected, and reinforced in their jokes. For as in *shabih khāni*, in production and circulation of these jokes there is no clear divide between the audience and the producers. In fact, one almost never knows who the producers are.

In a hot summer day in 2003, as I was making my way on the crowded sidewalk in Āryāshahr Square, my eyes suddenly caught sight of a naked belly with a pierced belly button. It appeared at once unanticipated and yet somehow predictable, shocking and yet trivial. It was predictable because one constantly came across creative transgressions on

American's effort to understand the sophisticated plans of Iranian politics while there was no real government in Iran, no organization or real plans and that the county was simply run by Imam Zamān, the twelfth Imam, jokes were part of the everyday exchange in Bam.

a daily basis in Tehran and thus the possibility of this appearance could not be denied. By 2003, it had become an established fact that the official rules of veiling—the covering of all parts of females’ bodies except hands and face—had so commonly and widely been modified by majority of young women that it had nearly lost its meaning. Both the opponents and the proponents of “hejab” (veiling) agreed that as a social practice it had turned into a mockery of the rule. Yet, becoming privy to the belly button of a young woman simply by walking on a street under the Islamic Republic introduced a new dimension to transgression.

The shock of this sight was similar to that of the joke in that I of course expected to hear jokes about war and even martyrs in Iran. But that I would hear a joke in which the desires and passions of war veterans would be so bluntly reduced to sexual polygamy was not something I could have imagined. Even my position as a “native” of Iran, and the fact that I was familiar with Iranians’ great sense of humor and ability to offer bold subversive commentaries on their sociopolitical and cultural condition, did not necessarily protect me from feeling a shiver of discomfort when I heard jokes such as the one in this chapter. The whys and hows of my own discomfort is another, not irrelevant, story to which I will later return. Let us just note here that there is a similarity between the anxiety that the “revolutionary generation”⁴⁰⁹ expresses about the subversive attitude of the “children of the revolution”⁴¹⁰ towards social and moral values and that which one detects in their jokes and daily language. This great anxiety one frequently encounters, is articulated in a variety of expressions and by different individuals of even opposing

⁴⁰⁹ By this term I am referring to those Iranians who, in 1979, were old enough to participate in the Revolution.

⁴¹⁰ I borrow the term from Behzad Yaghmaian (2002) to refer to the generation who were born after the 1979 Revolution.

groups of “revolutionary generation.” This agreement is one of the most intriguing ironies of the relationship between revolution, structure, and authority. But, here I will concentrate on the relationship between the transgression of the joke and our veiled young women’s belly button.

What is essential to the analysis of this young woman’s outfit is the conformity with nearly all the elements of the formal Islamic dress code in Iran (e.g. head cover, the manto, pants,...) in conjunction with their very transgression. The only missing articles of “hejab” in her attire were socks and her sandals which revealed her feet and her long, polished toenails which were proof of the regular care she evidently provided for them. This strange “obedience,” nevertheless, was overturned by her most astonishingly “perverted” interpretation and appropriation of the rules. The result was more like a satirical commentary on the rules, which of course also indicated the creativity of stretching the boundaries of “propriety.”⁴¹¹ In her non-conformist conformity, her outfit could be seen as a manifestation of a Farsi expression that says: “Its dissection is good, damn with its composition”—the latter part literally means: may dead washer take away its composition” (tajziyesh khoobeh, mordeh shor tarkibesho bebareh).⁴¹² This

⁴¹¹ The recent trend in Iran to publish the actual and serious statements of some of the high ranking government officials as jokes is an interesting case in point. The Friday sermons of Hojat-ul Islam Mulla Hasani are published and go under several prints for people purchase and even give them to their friends as “hilariously funny jokes.” In fact I was given a copy of it which when I read I thought that they were modified to turn into what in the book sounded like jokes. I was not convinced until I myself heard him. Also, recently an intense debate in Iran considering a test that the teachers had to pass to be able to consider religiously knowledgeable to teach in Iranian schools was published and has been even the subject of debates in the parliament. The questions which are mainly about the Prophet Mohammad are so bizarre that if one is not told that they are questions offered by the Ministry of Education in Iran for its teachers one would either take them as jokes or as offensively disrespectful as the Danish cartoons which provoked so much violence in reaction. One of the questions compared the Prophet’s characteristics to a rooster.

⁴¹² This expression often used in many different ways. Its most superficial, though not less common, usage has to do with people’s appearances, where someone appears Ok if one analyzes their appearance, element by element, but as a general outlook he or she does not look attractive or even OK looking. Of course more complex connotations are not limited to appearance and beauty.

expression however did not sufficiently explain the relationship between her clothing and the rules of the dress code in Iran.

One could not claim that the pieces (dissection) of her clothing were in accordance with the rule but the composition was transgressive. For her outfit was neither totally dismissive of the rules of the “veiling” (hejāb) of the Islamic Republic, nor were any parts of it “acceptable” according to these rules. Her head cover was a transparent, bright pink silky shawl that loosely fell from the middle of her head to her shoulders. Even before she passed by so that I could see her curly hair that covered her slim back all the way to her waist, I could see that the shawl was narrow enough to reveal a large portion of her thick blond hair in the front.⁴¹³ Her thin and short manto barely reached her upper thighs; it was so tight that it showed off all the curves of her body. The manto was only buttoned at the chest, so I could see the chain of her necklace all the way to the upper part of her breasts where her necklace disappeared. Between her yellow topless shirt and her very low cut light purple pants there was enough naked skin to provoke reactions from those nearby. Her cotton pants reached just below her knees.

These present pieces of necessary “hejab,” with their creative appropriation are similar to the way in which the elements of the war accounts appear in our joke, yet in their modified form offer an entirely different reading than that of the official discourse. As with the description of the night at the front, in the extremity of its breach from that of the joke appear as if an invitation and the very space for the women ghosts to emerge, the flipside of the story of the belly button is the authorities’ once in awhile invoked debate about building sex segregated sidewalks. In both cases, the ambiguities and subversions

⁴¹³ These slippery narrow shawls, which did not even cover the neck or the upper chest, had become a new fashion of the young women in Tehran as in 2003-2004.

are challenges to the illusions of a possible single authoritative reality and a fixed normality.

Precisely here lies my concern with the similarity between the joke and the young woman's belly button. I am interested in the complexity of techniques and tactics with which these subversive acts are undertaken. My fascination with the young woman's choice of clothing is not so much about the daring public display of her belly button, which is usually conjured by different groups within and outside Iran in a reductionist manner, either as a sign of resistance, alienation from Islamic culture, or westoxification, depending on the interpreter. I am rather intrigued by the very fact that her act is reducible to none of these categorizations; that it is not only a mockery of the very rules but one of the reasons by which the rules survive. That it is as much an "Iranian style" of deconstructing the rules and, in an increasingly global world, an imitative gesture of the Western values, as it is a way of fortifying the very structure it aims to deconstruct. Such "isolated," "exceptional" incidents are the harbinger of new normativities and an opening for further transgression. This is where the great anxiety of the hegemonic forces lies, in relation to these initially singular subversions.

It is an undeniable reality that, in recent years, such sights have captured the attention of Westerners and Iranians who live abroad and visit Iran like tourists, with an obsession not so different from that of Orientalist voyagers of the 19th century. The implications of the particular imagery that is produced by these "travelogues" are of course no less significant in perpetuating new realities.⁴¹⁴ Yet, the significance of the joke and the belly button, I suggest, is far more complex than what these seemingly

⁴¹⁴ One does not need to look far to see these representations. In the headlines of *New Times*, Tehran is honored with the title of the "Sexiest City in the world." To realize how prolific these productions have grown among the Iranians abroad, just look at the website Iranians.com

exceptional and isolated incidents convey. Even a brief glance over the process of change and consolidation of the rules of veiling in Iran and its transgressions will indicate that this trajectory has by no means been a straight line forward. Moreover, it has been the product of an intricately dialectical relationship between the authoritative rules and daily practices in an increasingly interactive relation with the world.⁴¹⁵

The general gist of the accounts about Iran, with regards to the common obsession with the “veil” by the Western media and even Iranians in the West, however, has often reduced the argument to a binary opposition between an authoritative homogenous state and resistant women. Polemically arguing against this view, some scholars have fallen into the trap of binaries and have suggested that Iranian women have voluntarily chosen to be veiled for it provides them with protective privacy in public. The reality, nevertheless, as one would have expected, can be explained by neither of these views, even though there are of course some truths in both of them. I will not herein offer a genealogy of the rules and their changes; nor will I explore the different ways these rules have been treated by various authority figures within the government or even by the same people in different periods. Suffice it here to remain cognizant of the fact that not only have these rules and their degree of implementation been subjected to constant change, but the way different groups of people have related to them has varied both over time and according to the characteristics of the groups and individuals. Evidently the relationship between these “actions upon actions” has also been vibrant and dynamic and reliant on many other sociopolitical factors.

⁴¹⁵ I hope it is clear that my notion of interactive global content does not imply equality in relations of power.

It is, for instance, nearly impossible to determine, with certainty, which one of the numerous reasons led Rafsanjani to announce that variety in colors and designs of dress codes were acceptable as long as they followed the rules of “proper” hejab, during his presidency in the “reconstruction period” (doureh-ye-bāzsāzi—the period which followed the end of Iran-Iraq War). One cannot say with any exactitude the extent to which Rafsanjani’s decision was a reaction to the pressure from people or how much his announcement escalated transgressive veiling; nor can one decisively agree with some of the government factions that his decision was essential in encouraging transgression in veiling.⁴¹⁶ The issue at stake in seemingly isolated and exceptional incidents, such as the joke and our woman friend’s display of her belly button in public is the very fact that they are not single individual incidents, but rather are products of and productive of social phenomena. Through these very individually based and exceptional acts which stretch the boundaries of legal veiling, these “non-legal” outfits become the public norm, and continue to set ever newer norms.

The Fourth Layer: (contextualization of a “faithful” reading)

Every night we slept with the (a, the) desire (ārezo), were awakened at dawn (sahar), went to the operation at early morning light (sepideh); then I stripped off (undressed) the wires (sim-ā) and H āji jumped over the mines (min-ā).

At first glance, the above translation seems to have taken us in a circle, back to where we had started; but, as with every return, neither the place nor the text appear exactly as they were before. It is true that with the disappearance of the apparitions of women, the joke seems to be masked again behind a comfortable zone of sanctioned

⁴¹⁶ Interestingly, Rafsanjani is strongly despised by many of the “hardliners” who believe his “liberal” policies, concerning Islamic codes, have led the country to stray too far away from Islam.

taboos. But, the memory of their hidden presence now takes the “form of haunting,” as does the difference between the “original” and the “substitution” in language and translation. Thus, while we have at hand a familiar and logical war narrative which sounds like so many of those that are published or broadcasted by the government media, the tension that reverberates behind it is reminiscent of the cynicism with which the official accounts are received.

In all these official accounts, similar, though more flowery, stories about “sleeping with the desire and wish (ārezo) for martyrdom, carrying out attacks at dawn (sepideh or sahar), and jumping over mines⁴¹⁷ are present. Hāji⁴¹⁸ also has been a common title for the clergy member at the front and in the Iran-Iraq War memoirs. The following excerpt from “the Islamic Republic Revolutionary Guard’s Journal”(Majalleh-ye Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e-Enghelāb-e Islāmi), Āshenā, in the “Special Issue for the families of the Revolutionary Guards” exemplifies the similarities and divergences between “legitimate” narratives of war and our joke.

Where is the front which used to release us from the prison of the soil? The front whose days were brighter than the sunrise and whose nights were more delicate than silk. It was at night at the front when we stretched our imploring hands to the skirt of our lover.⁴¹⁹ It was at night at the front when we whispered the pain and carried the thousands of suns of faith of our hearts to the visit of the sunrise. It was at night at the front when we would find the

⁴¹⁷ In fact, in the early years the regime bragged about the number of young teenage boys who willingly rushed into the minefields and offered their bodies as mine detecting devices; the opponents of course magnified those accounts, and accused the government of brainwashing the youth and leading them to their death.

⁴¹⁸ Hāji, in general refers to the men who have gone to pilgrimage in Mecca, as Hājieh is the term with the same connotation for women. It is however often used for clergy members, in contexts such as this joke. In everyday language it has now become a common and somewhat honorary term almost substituting Mr. and Mrs.

⁴¹⁹ Of course the yār (lover) here has nothing to do with a woman; it rather implies, and is to be read, as God, Imam Hussein, Imam Zaman, Imam Khomeini,...name it, God and all his saints but no woman whatsoever.

key of the divine doors under the thick curtains of the night. It was at night at the front when we ascended [to heaven]. At night at the front we made love with God. At night at the front we followed the steps of the angels. May those good days be remembered!

The front was the smile of life. The blessing and kind hands of God! The kind bosom which caressed us with martyrdom! It was the vivacious market for merchandizing eternity, the hunting ground of immortality, the unbounded treasure of pain whose moments would interpret life and living lovingly and mystically. The front eliminated the distances between the soil and the galaxies and gave us entry to the angels' party. The front was the sea joining to which took away the feeling of being a droplet. It expanded our limits to become the sea.

The night of attack, the night of flight, the night of ascendance, the night of departure and never coming back, and the crazy ones in love with being slaughtered, and the infatuated who ecstatically and drunk with the wine of love rushed to their slaughterhouse. The front was the locale of farewell, farewell to every I and every us (1997: 21).

Comparing the two nights of fronts, as they are described in the joke and in the government journal, once again brings to light Marx's testament that "the unity of the commodity" and of words as commodities, "is also its internal and irreducible difference"(quoted in Morris, 2000). It is the reality of different linguistic and sociopolitical meanings contained in words that enables our jokes to overturn the authoritative romanticized version of veterans' "divine" desire for martyrdom to such a transgressive reading. This haunting difference transforms the desire for unity and "making love" (*`eshgh bāzi*) with God into erotic fantasies of sexual relationships with multiple young women.

But what, in this particular application of language, has allowed our joke to achieve this stunning metamorphosis through such tiny mutations? Which rules are employed or broken by it so that it could remain faithful to the "economy of

expenditure,”⁴²⁰ to convert the veterans’ orgasmic ecstasy in attacking the enemy—which is not so much about defeating the enemy than about being “slaughtered” by them—to their orgasmic intercourse “amaliyyāt” with a young woman, Sepideh? How is it that in the same breath one’s mind strays from the fatal task of stripping off the wires and jumping over the mines to undressing a woman, Simā, and jumping over another, Mina, and back? Perhaps the more piercing question to be asked is: what kinds of social imaginary and imagining of the social engenders and permits not only this coexistence, but also the very possibility both for the representation of veterans’ pure mores and their fall from grace into sexual lust? Examination of these questions would take us in and out of language, while all along compelling us to realize the impossibility of utter translation and yet the inevitability of living in language, and thereby always already in translation.

Jokes and the collapse of Boundaries

The complex mechanism by which the ambivalent relationship between signifiers and signified creates different identification and imagination in our minds is manifest at the very core of this joke. Let us return to the new version of the translation in which “simā” and “minā” are no longer single words, but are rather split into “sim-ā” and “min-ā.” The word “simā” (wires) is the plural form of “wire” (sim) or (سيم), as “minā-Minā” (مينا) is the plural of “mine” (مين). As it is clear, the difference between the singular forms of these two nouns, (سيم) and (مين) are easily distinguishable, both in their writing and utterances, from the plural and the female proper names, (سيما) and (مينا). Confusion with the proper female names occurs only within the crowded space of

⁴²⁰Like the making of jokes, here I have twisted Freud’s term around to mean something else.

plurality, where the gravity of destructive communication of “wires” (simā) and the horror of “mines” (minā) allows for the “profane” sexual relationship with Simā and Minā to be superimposed over the divine desire of unity with God.

But this collapse of boundaries is not common to Farsi in general, but rather only to its colloquial form of speaking and writing. Colloquial Farsi, in an analogous gesture with the multitude’s acts of walking in opening up spaces, hosts ambivalence within and allows multiple realities to coexist. De Certeau juxtaposes the multitude’s act of walking with the territorial, authoritative, attempts to map places, which I herein find parallel to the formal Farsi, mainly as the language of the elite. The relationship between the informal and formal language is like that of nomadic readers to the authoritative text. Like elites who assert their distinction even within a collective, the thresholds and rules of formal Farsi are firmly and cautiously protected.

In formal Farsi, the plural form, “wires” is written as “simhā, or “sim hā”(سیم ها - سیمها), and “mines” as “minhā” or “min hā” (مینها-مین ها), both of which are easily distinguishable from “Simā” (سیما) and “Minā” (مینا), the proper female names. In accordance with its subordinate position, jokes mainly use informal Farsi and poach formal words only now and then when necessary. In the omission of “h” in simhā and Minhā, the ghosts of Simā and Minā come to invade and collapse on simā and minā.⁴²¹ In translation, as in the earlier stage where the distinction between proper names and nouns had to be made visible for the secret of the humor to come into the open, once again, new boundaries need to be erected for the trick of the humor to be revealed in English. This new divide is to separate the singularity and plurality of the nouns from

⁴²¹ In fact there is even one more layer of difference between the formal written Farsi and the colloquial speaking form, where “Simhā” would be written as “سیم ها” and “Minhā” as “مین ها”.

one another and from the individuality of a single person. The dashes between “sim” and “ā” or “min” and “ā” are employed as fences to isolate the serious task of stripping off the wires and the fatal detection of the mines from being distracted by the lust and the seduction of the ghostly women.

To translate the mechanism by which the joke obtains its transgressive laughter, rules of segregation and oppositional binaries are to be constructed in English. Dashes were deployed earlier to separate the nouns and proper names—the individuality of the latter received distinction also by beginning with capital letters. In the new translation, dashes split the words to differentiate between both the plural and singular nouns and the proper female names. These differences not only proves Bakhtin’s notion of language as “a concrete sociopolitical and ideological reality” but it also offers a commentary on the divergent ways in which the history of recent Iran is narrated by different subjects. This reality speaks for the way that, in Bakhtin’s words, “every utterance brings into being a distinct accent, denotation, and a new imprinting in the memory.” Not only does what is uttered and written communicate different realities, but who, how, when, and where something is told has a great deal to do with how it is conjured.

Thus, in formal Farsi and in translation, the possibility of ambivalence and difference is ignored in two ways: the “falsely premised” fantasy of “actual substitutability” of signifiers and the signified and the dream of absolute authority and submission. Yet, as the thresholds of the formality and informality of language are constantly changing, so are the boundaries and the definitions of authority and submission. The result is comparable to the Enlightenment’s project, which in its attempt to exorcise ghosts nearly turned the living into ghosts.

It is not therefore surprising that both the authorities in Iran and Western journalists and anthropologists end up sacrificing one version to highlight the other. In English, to bring the “innocent” nouns and the eroticism of the women together, we needed to insert dashes in between them, as if they were the curtains that the Islamic Republic installs in the Caspian Sea to separate men’s and women’s swimming areas from one another. And yet the intricacy that is missed here, that which the joke so cleverly plays with, is that they are inseparable; the curtain in the sea never works and thus makes a mockery of its own purpose. These realities live in a single national body! Ignoring this fact is the source of the shock that I, the seemingly native anthropologist, encountered not merely upon hearing the jokes such as the one here, but, for example, at the sight of the belly button of a young woman on the streets of Tehran.

Similarly, the transpiration of Ārezo, Sahar, and Sepideh, in our joke subtly expresses an array of conflicting emotions, from suppressed anger, entrapped sexuality, cynicism, and alternative “truths” to that of the hegemonic “Truth.” And like our woman friend with her outfit, the joke receives its constitutive elements from the very structure it disrupts. The phantasmagoric materialization of the young women, which crowds the text and the joke, also reveals the congealed and chained sexuality of the narrations of the war, and society in general, under the Islamic Republic. The repressed and unfulfilled desires, Freud would have suggested, entertain their satisfaction in the joke, or in the transgressive acts of the young individuals as expressed by a brilliant woman in her early 20s, Ārezo, whom I met in flesh, not as the ghostly presence that appears in the joke. Ārezo, one of the two daughters of a former political dissident couple, spoke of these contradictions as:

The government has imposed the mandatory dress code on us. It obliges us to hide our body and our sexuality. Our face is what is left to our own control, and we do whatever it takes to draw attention by making it more visible, even by wearing so much make up as though our face is a painting board. Our face becomes the terrain of our creativity and expression, and we exercise our most and our best to utilize it to compensate for our deprivations, our lack of control on our bodies and lives.

Behind this liberal notion of individual right and choice, which is common, specifically to middle class young urban Iranians, another idea palpitates. This has to do with the new attitude towards female sexuality and modesty. While, as Afsaneh Najmabadi argues, the banning of veiling under the Shah reinforced modest female social conducts, the rules of veiling under the Islamic Republic has boosted the desire of young women for being gazed at and fantasized by men. Ārezo expresses this desire by explaining to me that “this is not only my opinion. Ask around among young women of my class and background and they will mostly give you the same answer; that they like to be stared at by men and admired as beautiful or even tasteful in their choice of fashion.” Interestingly, while these women attempt to make their faces more visible to compensate for their hidden bodies, in our joke, women have no face. They are mere sexual bodies.

Nastaran’s constant tension with her father is exemplary in indicating the radical shift in views about gender and sexuality of the Iranian middle class young generation. Nastarn’s father constantly expressed anxiety about and dissatisfaction with her appearance which, according to him, offered itself as an object of pleasure to men’s eyes and their sexual fantasies. He warned his daughter, who was already a college student, that she was allowing men to take advantage of her by inviting their gaze. Time and again this conversation occurred with nearly identical discussions. Each time, Nastaran

calmly and lightheartedly, and almost flirtingly responded to her father: “why do you think that I am a victim of men’s desires. Why can’t you see that I am as much part of this pleasure as they are?” These statements unfailingly drove her father to his wits’ end. But Nastaran seemed to enjoy this tension which often scared me, for the father seemed to be about to have a heart attack. She rather proudly went on to say: “I do in fact enjoy their gazes as well as returning them. The pleasure is mutual.” At this stage Nastaran’s father would have already left the room to stop himself from doing something out of rage that he might later regret.

Like jokes, sexuality communicates variety of complex issues. As a metaphor, an embodiment, and a symptom of social realities, sexuality offers more than individual satisfaction, as jokes give more than laughter. Like jokes, sexuality could also be used as a means of transgressing authoritative rules, it could be a way to release tension and frustration, and both a response to and a remedy for painful traumatic experiences. The illogical nature of polygamous sex in the joke is an allusion to absurdity of war and its representations as a divine love making with God and a feast with angels. The joke mimics the hypocrisy, double talk, and the huge chasm between real diversity of experiences and memories of war and the manipulated, homogenous official version. As a parody of such empty words, its playful effort is to disrupt, intervene, and penetrate their guarded boundaries, to poach and transgress the “legitimate memoirs.” And yet as with jokes, none of the aforementioned possibilities exhaust other ways in which sexuality might play a role in the lives of the Iranian youth today.

In the humorous “memoir” of the joke, like our young women’s outfit, nothing seems to be entirely fabricated; nothing that is not already within the boundaries of the

formal discourse. And yet as with the belly button of our young friend, what emerges from the text is entirely unexpected, though it could have been anticipated. Like *shabih khāni* (reading similar), which borrows from the official religious discourse even while its very existence transgresses its dogma, the joke also simultaneously utilizes and exploits the very language and themes it undermines. By way of slight alterations which sneak into fissures, fill in empty spaces, and make holes here and there, the belly button of the war account is exposed. In its techniques, content, and form, the joke resembles the young women's "submission" to and "obedience" of the rules of mandatory veiling.

This technique resembles "pichoondan" (rotating around) and "do dareh kardan" (maneuvering within two doors) which, in the inventive language of Tehrani youth, both refer to the way they mislead and beguile one another but mostly their parent and other authorities. "Pichoondan" is a way of using "legitimate" rules but playing with their discrepancies, apertures, and slippages, so that the expected result is reversed. In this sense, these youngsters, unlike the generation of their parents, seek changes not through a "radical" disruption and a face to face "revolutionary" movement, but from within and by a playful bending of taboo subjects.

The Remembered and the Forgotten

The war with Iran began in 1980, so soon after the 1979 Revolution that the revolutionary dreams and fervor were still powerful forces of mobilization of the masses. During eight years of war, the suppression within grew side by side with the devastation caused by the war. As the streets and alleys of every town and village were adorned by the new state martyrs' names,⁴²² the walls of dissident families' homes were crowded by

⁴²² Sometimes these entitlements caused tensions among the martyrs' families and the authorities, for the numbers of martyrs were more than the number of the allies in the street and those whose children were not

the photos of their executed loved ones. Revolution that in the dreams of many religious and leftist intellectuals was to bring about a classless society had gone in a different direction. Under this new regime of power and its sociopolitical and economic institutions, a new class of wealthy people was created. The capital of the poor was their flesh and the bodies that they offered to the state; poor families were rich with martyrs.

Yet offering life did not in and of itself offer equal material compensations.

“Our kids were young and had no real rank in the revolutionary guard,” so Kobrā khānom (lady Kobrā), an elderly mother of a state martyr, told me as I stared in shock at her nearly collapsing house. “My son was a basiji, so his pension is very meager,” Kobrā khānom matter-of-factly told me as she helped me to bend my head and pass through a very low door into her 20 square meter “house.” “But you say your son was a voluntary basiji (voluntary militia). Doesn’t this mean that he went to war on his own, not out of duty to his job? Should it not bring more respect to your son? I asked Kobrā Khānom as I noticed the wet wall and the ceiling of her room which seemed about to collapse. Noticing the direction of my gaze, she explained: “It is because of the public bath that is attached to this wall. It is always wet.” Then as if it were an old issue useless to dwell upon, she returned to the earlier conversation and said: “But they pay families according to these martyrs’ previous positions and salaries. It is true that those closer to the system get rich. But not people like me.”

The social and cultural settings had already begun to diverge between the rich and the poor neighborhoods of Tehran, even before war ended. Grieving and serving Islam

chosen felt discriminated against. The politics of whose name names what was in and of itself an important story of which I hope to write at some point. A significance of the position of a martyr was often directly related and commented on by the authorities on the type of the place his name named. Most of high ranking commanders’ names have adorned the main highways in Tehran, as well as main hospitals, and public institutions.

was observed on one side, while, on the other side, VCRs and satellites and live underground concerts were prevailing within the thick walls of luxurious houses. The more dead brought back from the front, the more children were conceived in the long dark nights of bombing under the dim lights of candles and in rooms with windows covered by thick black curtains.

These children grew up with the sound of alarms accompanied by a male voice that solemnly said: “the alarm you hear is the red alarm and its meaning and connotation is that the air attack is imminent [will happen]. Please go to the shelter and do not leave until the danger is over.” Nobody answered Damāvand’s questions about all the strange things this guy said. Damāvand was a precocious child of a dissident family, whose father was already in jail though he was not yet executed in those days of Tehran’s bombing in 1987. He still remembered that his father had told him that one does not hear the colors but sees them, “why was the guy saying they would hear red alarm? I asked my mom.” He wondered why was it that the sound that was supposed to be red forced them to turn all the lights off and sit in the dark. “Even more bizarre to me was that I could never figure out what the sound was really supposed to do. It sometimes sounded when the bombing had already happened; other times we sat at dark waiting and I never knew why then we turn the lights back on and everything seemed to go back to normal only to turn it off again,” so Damāvand recalled his days of the Iran-Iraq War, in 2004.

For Mehrnoosh, a young woman in her early 20s, “the shocking thing is that everyone tries so hard to forget. If you talk to most kids about war, they say they remember nothing. But for years I did not know why the sound of every ambulance that

passed by, or the lightening and thunderstorm, or grenades with which kids played made me shiver and feel so unreasonably disturbed and frightened. Only after a long period of psychotherapy, which she could afford and most youngsters cannot, Mehrnoosh discovered the relationship between her reaction to these sounds and her experiences of war time.

The end of the war was the beginning of the reconstruction period “doreh-ye bāzsāzi,” the era of trying to attract the West and the era of legitimization of colors, claps, and laughter,⁴²³ but, even more, of the economic prosperity of an emerging minority. To legalize pervasive sexual interaction between unrelated men and women, temporary marriage was sanctioned by Rafsanjani. Those veterans who had spent long years at the front returned to find out that the positions of power and wealth were already taken by those who had served at the front for a brief period. A new battle was taking shape over the quantities of the offerings, and the earthly awards and compensations. The veterans’ injuries were measured and quantified. The criterion of “jānbāz-e chand dar sadi,”⁴²⁴ (what percentage of injury) was routinely utilized to determine the compensation for the injured, while in many cases the injury did not lend itself to measurement. Martyrdom and “playing-risking with one’s body” (jānbāzi) [injured in war] had all become subjected to material calculation and repayment. Hypocrisy of the words and realities

⁴²³ I am using these in double meanings, as metaphors and as physical realities of the time, concerning for instance Rafsanjani’s permission for diverse color of mantos and scarves, the returning of clap instead of the chants.

⁴²⁴ The word itself provides an amazing ambiguity between its meaning and the reality of the ongoing practices on the ground. The word “jānbāz” literally means someone who plays with his or her body and soul. This play however is a “serious game” of life and death. It refers to the veteran who puts his life at risk and is willing to die or lose limbs fighting the enemy. He is a living martyr, the title that is granted to Khameneye, for he was injured but is alive. So, in that sense jānbāz also offers his life with no demands or expectations, yet he is alive and lives on the awards, compensations, and privileges offered for his injuries. The reality is that so many of them are left uncared or poorly cared for; the story which is rarely told.

were already becoming the themes of new war movies.⁴²⁵ The more visible the double standard, the more withdrawn from state propaganda and its claimed values.

Demonstration of enthusiasm towards “Western culture,” seemed to be a means of revenging authorities who constantly accused any transgression as a voluntary enslavement to the West. Even “nohehs” (religious hymns) were imitating the rhythm of the Iranian pop music broadcast from Los Angeles.⁴²⁶

The Joke: The “Lizard” of Language of Purity

The seemingly negligible mutations or choices of words are as vital for the joke as are the changing of the colors to a survival of a lizard. Rather than random choices, all the elements in the joke are specifically and cunningly chosen and assembled. Instead of *sepideh* or *sahar*, the veteran could have used *sobheh zood*. But this term could have no longer offered the possibility of being coupled with a woman, *Sepideh*, nor would it present a poetic form of speech that most of the official war accounts employ. Not only does this poetic utterance deliver the doubles and thereby the subversive humor, but it also alludes to and ridicules romanticization and beautification of violence in official narrations.⁴²⁷

⁴²⁵ *Aroosi-e-khoobān* by Makhmalbaf and *Az Karkheh Ta Rāyn* By Hatami Kia are examples of this genre of films.

⁴²⁶ In fact it took me a few minutes to realize that it was a religious hymn and not hip-hop music being broadcasted from the loudspeaker in the Behstzahra Cemetery, one day as I was visiting the state martyrs' section. It was not just the rhythm that came as shocking in these *nohehs*; the lyrics were also an incredible imitation of the pop music, using love and romantic phrases to speak of the love for Imam Hussein,...although the theme of love is a time-honored element of the Iranian poetry, specifically of Sufi literature and poetry which are saturated with expressions of love for God and the saints, but the lyrics of these *nohehs* were a novelty. They were attuned with the language of youth and their new language of expressions of love. Even Roshan, a son of an executed father who says he is madly in love with Imam Hussein, told me that the language of these new *nohehs* is radically different from the old forms. In his words: “They are more erotic and trendy.”

⁴²⁷ A professor of sociology, who had done research on the last wills of the martyrs, claimed that over 50% of these wills were entirely fabricated, many even written after the death of the martyrs, themselves. And

Furthermore, the joke entails a mockery of the manner of speech of the clergy in which the non-colloquial and the literary are peculiarly mixed together, with distinctive pronunciation, like a semi-dialect of the clergy.⁴²⁸ This fusion of the literary, somewhat bookish, tone and the colloquial is illustrated in the joke when suddenly the poetic forms, *sepideh*, *sahar*,...in the last line are followed by the vernacular, non-literal terms *simā* and *mina*. The plural of “sim” (the wire) and “min” (the mine), in formal Farsi are “sim-hā” (the wires), and “min-ha”(the mines),⁴²⁹ which in daily conversation are abbreviated and converted to *simā* and *minā*, respectively. It is as though in the omission of the “h” and in the compression of that space in between, common to the informal speech in Farsi, a necessary ritual of purification is eliminated. In the eradication of the “h,” the destructive violence of war fuses with sexual fantasies, a copulation that, as discussed by many scholars of war and violence, abridges the distance between war and aggressive sexuality.⁴³⁰

This revelation reminds one of the news of the shelter of the “runaway girls” having turned into an informal brothel house whose customary owners and clients were

most of the remaining ones were dictated to them on the nights before the attacks. What is of concern here is not how accurate the statistics are but that such fabrication was occurring.

⁴²⁸ Impossible to illustrate this difference in translation, the film “Marmoolak” (the Lizard) was a very apt and skillful illustration of this distinction of utterances, also ungraspable in subtitles. The reaction of the youth was an amazing ethnographic observation for me. For days and nights, they waited in lines, for hours, to purchase tickets and the movie theatre was on the verge of exploding with their loud laughter. I was invited to go to see the film at 2 in the morning, with Ferdous and her two children, in their 20s, who had already made the reservation. There was still an unbelievably long waiting line when we left the movie theatre at four AM. The youth, all made up and cheerful, were to go and laugh at the clergy. But the movie uses this to exactly reach its reversed aim. It is interesting to see the miming of one another is constantly going on in Iran, a competition to acquire the most accessible language to others.

⁴²⁹ This move from the formal to informal speech, though common to the clergy, is the reason that the end of the joke is not immediately revealed to most of its audience, including myself. I told it to others in Iran and outside and, interestingly, none of the adults of my generation instantly got the punch line in the last part. It takes a moment of pause to think of *sim hā*, when one hears of *simā*, or vice versa.

⁴³⁰ See also the Vietnam and the World War memories.

some well-known clergy members.⁴³¹ Mirroring the pretext of spirituality and the “profanity” of their actual life, the joke translates the preaching of the clergy for intimacy with God to their intercourse with Simā and Minā. It borrows their language but scandalizes it; it turns it upside down.

Celebratory Violence, Violence of Celebration

Pervasive and dispersed within the entire edifice of society, violence has acquired an array of “novel” nuances. Like the women in the joke, violence appears in unanticipated situations, for instance, within the formerly festive and fun ambience of “chahārshanbeh souri” (a celebration of the last Tuesday of the Iranian old year during which people used to make a small fire and jump over it as a way of giving away their sadness, illness, and boredom and to obtain the energy, health and dynamism of fire). Until very recent years, this tradition used to involve several days of fun preparation in which everyone participated, regardless of generation, sex, social class, and religious and ethnic background. Despite a diversity of its forms, the celebration shared many common elements all around Iran. Chahārshanbeh souri was a time of joy and festivity and playfulness that brought children and adults of the neighborhoods together.

Very early on after its inception, the Islamic Republic repeatedly denounced the celebration as a pagan, pre-Islamic ritual and an occasion on which the segregation of sexes was disrupted. However, people persisted and continued to celebrate it along with

⁴³¹ This news even found its way into the newspapers in 2004. These stories of high ranking clergy being involved in such issues are no longer news. As such, they have become commonsense knowledge, no longer surprising and yet they still stir up emotions mostly because they oppose the formal image of the clergy, the hypocrisy, as people refer to it. Informants relate stories of the martyrs’ wives being the subject of such abuses. Simā, a martyr’s wife, had her own predicament regarding such issues, that she nevertheless maneuvered, in most cases, to her advantage. This specific case made the news, not just for its timing, but also because the anthropologist and a filmmaker, Ziba Mirhoseini and Kim Longinott, in their documentary movie titled “Runaway” had brought the shelter to light right before this “corruption” was exposed. Did the work of the anthropologist have anything to do with the case coming under scrutiny? I do not know!

the Iranian New Year which the regime also attempted to undermine. As with every “action upon action,” the push and pull, the venture and maneuver influenced its forms and configurations to the point that what is called chahārshanbeh souri today, at least in Tehran, has very little to do with its basic elements and the previous modalities. In its stead an unprecedented phenomenon, an incredibly drastic metamorphosis of its older forms, has been created; the following passage from my notes might be illustrative.

I finally shared this piercing question in my mind with Ārezo, a woman in her late 20s, who is a brilliant journalist and a painter. [As I mentioned earlier, she is one of the two daughters of a couple both of whom are former political inmates]. She and I had had a long conversation about many issues including her life as a child, and the memories of her parents' arrest,... I found her intelligent, perceptive, and articulate. Unlike most of the children of the dissidents she seems still to keep an active relationship to the issues that are perhaps provocative of the memories of her past but she seems to have come to terms with them. All this made me feel that she was the best person to answer my question. So I asked her: “I was so extremely shocked with the chahārshanbeh souri celebration this year. I had read about violence that people said had become very common in celebrating it. But I had heard that it was the angry youngsters using the celebration as a pretext to target pāsdārs “revolutionary guards” and “basijis” (voluntary militia that support the regime). It kind of made sense. But what I experienced this yea, having seen it for the first time in many years, was absolute madness. This violence seems totally random but widespread. It was more like collective sadism, a hysteric fury and fervor for destruction. What really came as striking

to me was that there were no traces of the real celebration, as we used to have then.

Adults and young kids seemed to be hiding in their homes.

I got caught for four hours in the office and no cab was willing to come and pick me up. The guys at the office had not told me that there was such a fear of being out in this evening. When I asked the guys in the office what is scary, they told me that it is an undeclared war out there fought by some youngsters against all. They threw explosive grenades on anything that moves. As I finally picked up a cab, agreeing to pay three times more than regular fee, and I asked the driver to also pick up another woman who seemed to be also stuck on the street, I regretfully asked them: what has happened? This used to be one of the best days of my life as I was growing up. What has gone wrong that that fun day has turned into such a destructive, nonsensical violent occasion? And I am now asking you Ārezo, how do you understand this transformation?"

"You know," Ārezo began talking, "You are not the only one who is shocked. Those of us who live here are not less struck by the evolution of forms of violence on this day even in the past year. Every year the television spends days talking about the damages this craziness causes. But it seems that it feeds their rage with more fuel. I think there is an explanation for all this. The way I see it, this is all related to the war and its effects on kids. I divide the youth of Iran into three generations: the kids of the revolution, who include individuals of about my age, who were born before the war; then there are those who were born and grew up in war time. I call them the war generation. And then there are those who came after the war. I think there is a significant difference between the youngsters of these three groups.

Our generation is much more compromising and less violent. Even when individuals of our group use violence, they often try other means before they finally resort to violent means; but the war generation is much more comfortable with violence, they easily use the warm weapons and kill with ease. They are less compromising with the regime than we are and even when it comes to the feasts and national ceremonies, we enjoy them differently. About Chahārshanbeh souri, the war generation no longer enjoys the trick and treats (ghāshogh zani) which we used to enjoy or those little tarragheh, (the mild explosives which just made sound but didn't cause harm). These things seem too mild for them; they don't get turned on by such toys. They go for real grenades and strong explosives. They don't feel happy to just make noises. They get off watching real injuries. The rage that war caused has not been dealt in our country.

You know it wasn't easy to grow up every night with the sound of missiles, with fear, in darkness, and the society was just too gloomy. Nobody laughed. Everyone wore black. One was surrounded by funeral processions, mourning. Death was too present. I think this has affected this generation. They were little kids growing up with all this. They are angry and frustrated and these occasions are their way of expressing anger and frustration, not chances for celebration. They are in fact fighting to have fun, but in the process they ruin the whole fun. But for them this is not about fun; it is a battle; the fun allows for the battle to happen. These children of war have no patience for innocent fun.” (March 31, 2004).

Twisting of the Words, Lightening the Darkness of Lonely Nights

The translation of violence into humor and the conversion of the festive occasions into destruction have painted a phantasmagoric and multi-colored landscape in which the

emotions and positions are doubled, overshadowed by, and disintegrated into, one another. Behind this merging and substitution of violence of war and the war of words in jokes and everyday life looms a memory of a gloomy past. It is a reminder of the gravity of the horror of the bombs and the lonely nights from which the four year old Damāvand found his only refuge in hiding under his bed and covering himself with a blanket, while his mother paced the road to the jail to hear of his father. His mother, Marziyeh, explains her life in those days as:

There were many executions in our family, one after another. You know we are a big family. My father had two wives and we were more than ten siblings. For years since 1981, we could not put away our black clothes for before the period for one mourning was passed we had another execution and another phase of mourning. I had been in black for so long and was so immersed in my worries and pain that I had not even noticed how Damāvand was growing up. I had not realized he did not laugh, nor did I realize that he was painting everything in black, until one day his teacher called me to school and told me about it.”

Those lonely dark nights were lit, for Damāvand, by his funny games of words, by distorting, twisting, and playing around with words. The violence of distorting language and the creation of a new language out of that distortion was Damāvand’s tactic to fight the dreadful physical destruction, loss, and death outside his childish world. His mother and other adults had been his guide when they had played with words to mislead him, in order to “protect” him against harsh realities. His father, he had been told, was in the university “dāneshgāh” (literary, the place of knowledge), for research. Until years later, when he learned that his father was in fact in “zendān” (jail), the frightening ambiance of this dāneshgāh (jail) had already been immersed in his memory. Learning to read for him was colored by the reading of the slips they were given for visiting his father

in “āsāyeshgāh” (the place of rest [the name of the wards in which the prisoners were kept]). “Why is dad in āsāyeshgāh?” he had asked his mom. He had been told him that dad had been studying hard and had become tired and thus needed some rest in this āsāyeshgāh. But every time he visited his dad in āsāyeshgāh, he seemed to look more tired and even ill, often bruised. He never understood why dad fell so much and bruised himself all the time. Why the people working in these āsāyeshgāhs, and dāneshgāhs were so nasty and rude. He hated all āsāyeshgāhs and dāneshgāhs and these nasty men in uniform who kept yelling at people, and constantly insulting his mom. And in every visit dad appeared with more bruises, more injuries, broken jaws and teeth.

Damāvand had learned to read at an early age. He had told me that he had vivid memories of his dad before his arrest, when he was only two. “I still see him coming home and holding me from under my armpits and rotating me around.” He recalled how they used to spend so much time together and that he was very attached to his father. “But then one day he did not come home. Mom was pregnant and became very sick since the day my dad did not come home.” Damāvand still remembers how people came and went whispering and he could hear they talked about him and his dad but could not make out what they were saying. He just knew it was horrible news.

“For the first few days after his father was gone,” Damāvand’s mother went on to say, “he ran out to the street and refused to come home; his aunt pledged with him to be the man of their home and take care of his mom and the baby that was on the way. Since then, he became quiet and suddenly acted like a grown up. He never complained about anything.” Damāvand whispers to me: “I had my words to play with. I played with words for hours, at dark, under the blanket and under my bed.” When I asked Damāvand

if, considering the circumstances, he really knew where his father really was but was unwilling to admit it to himself, he briefly paused and then went on to say: “This is a strong possibility. I think in a sense my imaginary world of words was my creation to escape the real one.”

Miming the Mimed

Outside of Damāvand’s imaginary world, the game of words was also becoming increasing more complicated and inventive. It had come that day, when in front of this “dāneshgāh” while waiting to meet the father, he had heard the man in uniform talking to his mom and using the word “e`dām” (execution). He had suddenly felt his mom’s hand, which was holding his, began to shake; it went cold and sweaty at once. He looked up to see her mother’s face; its sight frightened him. “Mom looked so pale, as white as a chalk, and her eyes had stopped blinking,” Damāvand recalled in 2004. But when he asked: “māmān, bābā e`dām shodeh?” (mom, has dad been executed?), his mother responded with a voice “engār az tahe chāh bālā miyomad”(as if reaching up from the bottom of a well), “nah pesaram, e`dām nah, e`zām” (no my son, not “executed” but “sent away”). By a change of one letter, D to Z, `edam had turned to `ezam, and his dad was back to life, having gone to do more research and get more rest. He had not been اعدام “`edam”(executed) but was اعزام “e`zām” (was sent away) to another dāneshgāh, too far away for visits.

This game of words continued for years. New modification had occurred; “ghabrestān” (cemetery) where his mother would go once a week, was translated for him as “golestān” (flower garden). This was a world that nothing meant what it was to mean; no word seemed to represent what it commonly did. “Golestāns” and “ghabrestāns,”

“dāneshgāhs” and “zendāns,” “e`dām” and “e`zām,” all these pairs were mystified and mixed.⁴³² In the abyss of those dark nights under his bed, in the chasm between his emotional confusion and the meanings of the words, in the span between those years of striving to make sense of the distance that disallowed seeing his dad, and the recognition of that impasse between life and death, he had been busy inventing his own version of language, of life. Outside world was miming his game as he mimed the world’s. Everyone seemed to be participating in the game of words. It was no longer a game. It was their life.

One cannot help but wonder if this is not the talent one captures today in the inventive play of words in the language of the youth, especially in their jokes. Yet, as with these games that are always intermingled with realities of life, their jokes is also built on and within the context of their lives; twisted as it might appear, it is a commentary and a way out of entrapment in their closed system of hegemony. For if the violent death can be considered as “more delicate than silk,” if the beloved dissident fathers are spoken of as martyrs behind closed doors at home, but are referred to as “mofseds” (corrupts), “mohāreb bākhodā” (the fighter with God), in their kids’ school, then why can’t the youth do the same to the authorities’ world of words. Why can’t they begin the act of “pichondan” (rotating) everything around.

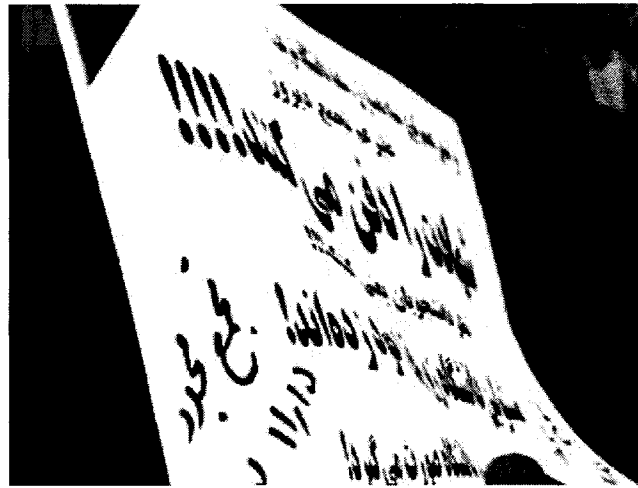
Thus, in the language of the youth, the innocent words meant curses and the curses lost their obscenity. If you ask a youngster about whatever subversion he undertakes, he will tell you that this or that person, this or that event, “has dropped its worm in my head” (kermesho endākht to saram), meaning that the idea was insinuated in

⁴³² The story of Damāvand’s life has been derived from my long tape recorded interviews with him.

the mind by someone or something else, like a worm which moves around bothering, poking, till you respond and react to it. Many worms have invaded the minds of the Iranian youth nowadays and are put into motion by the surrounding sociopolitical realities.

Chapter 8

From Utopian to Undesirable Pragmatic Subjectivities: Perfect “Ādams” and “Ghāltāghs”



“They are Burying Martyrdom”

“They Are Burying Martyrdom!” (shahādat rā dafn mikonnand). This oxymoronic statement was written on a placard that was held up by San`ati Sharif University students in protest against burying state martyrs in University grounds. The reader might recall this event and the protest which both took place in the winter of 2006 from chapter three. What appears intriguing in the statement on this sign (They are Burying Martyrdom) is that it challenges the act of burying martyrs in such unconventional public spaces on the same ground and by the same implicit logic that justifies it. Equating the act of burying martyrs in public grounds, which are conventionally demarcated as those of the living, with burying martyrdom has significant implications, especially concerning the poetics and politics of memory, mourning and commemoration. It also highlights the relationship of power and its territorial claims

over the life and death of its citizens. In chapter seven, I attempted to show how manipulation, the application of language and collective memory have been at the crossroads of an uneven but dialectical and dynamic relationship between hegemonic forces and the subordinate populace, particularly the youth. In this chapter, I return once again to de Certeau's writing to speak of two discursive modalities, the authoritative scriptural discourses and the innovative and transgressive nomadic acts of reading.

As I have tried to show in earlier chapters, I do not consider the relationship between these two modes as unfaltering, oppositional or impermeable. Rather, I conjure them in their dialectically becoming realities and in their act of forcing others and being forced to shift the horizons of their own views and actions and of the other. Through ethnographic account of everyday experiences, I show how the loss of the revolutionary ideals has left a void in the space within which undesirable yet pragmatic subjectivities are produced. I suggest that guilt continues to exist and burden the consciousness of the "revolutionary generation" but without revolutionary hopes lurking behind it. I show how state authorities release guilt as blame on their increasingly wider spectrum of "others" within, who are starting to encompass almost the entire nation and beyond. The dissidents blame the cunning religious clergy who robbed everyone of values by imposing their "fanatic rules" on others while acting hypocritically themselves. Their relationship to the youth is even more complicated. They seem to feel guilty about the inheritance they believe they have forced upon their children by being activists and eventually subjecting their children to its painful consequences. But, at the same time, they resent them for not living with the values and responsibilities of their inheritance.

Both the families of dissidents and of state martyrs seem to agree on one thing: that the youth has no moral values and no shame about this lack. While for the state ideologues, this is the result of the work of the West and its cultural invasion; for most Iranians it is the Islamic Republic and its officials who are responsible for training these kids to become sly, trust no one and leave nothing in place. Throughout my research, I was repeatedly surprised by how similar the words and metaphors used to speak of the youth are among parents of dissident and state martyr backgrounds. For instance, at least five mothers of dissident backgrounds told me that so similar the youth looked, behaved, and dressed that it was as though they all belonged to one single parent. Yet, the moment these same parents began speaking of their own children, the singularities were greatly apparent to them and to me. Why is it that one at once seemed to hold a generalized and homogenized mental picture of Iranian youth, as if they were undivided by class, gender, place of birth, residence, and so on; yet the moment, one came to speak of them in these general terms, all that generality began to collapse? One began to contradict oneself by one's own examples. Here, I will not enter a discussion of the various mediums through which nations are constituted as "imagined communities" (Anderson: 1983) where citizens are made to belong by imitating models in this virtually fashioned community. I will instead concentrate on the numerous ways in which modalities of languages differ when they seem alike, and might be read as similar while appearing on opposite sides. My goal in other words is to return to the ethical question that inspired this project from the outset, to show the spaces of diversities not as oppositions but as living realities. More importantly, my attempt in this concluding chapter is to offer a way of seeing anew, as though a child and for the first time and yet with the sensibility of having lived it if not

in one's own body, then somewhere in the body of one's ancestors which could belong to any group with whom one comes into contact, on paper or face to face.

But first, let us revisit the game of words that the youth so skillfully play. As the statement in the opening illustrates (they are burying martyrdom), and as I showed in chapter seven, the youth challenge the hegemonic system from within, thus threatening its monopolizing power yet fueling the survival of the very structure they undermine. I will not offer any speculations here about the extent to which the youth's challenges will engender new venues and possibilities for radically overturning authoritative discourses and imposed memories in the future. Instead, I suggest that we explore the post-revolutionary discursive plays and word games of the youth, and of society at large, as a transgressive form of reading and as a commentary on the absurdity of the present. That word games are a widespread phenomenon under the Islamic Republic should come as no surprise considering that the state has claimed its guardianship over the "Sacred Word." As mentioned in previous chapters, these games are not merely played by children and teenagers. Rather, they take place at a much larger scale including at the level of official discourses. During the Iran-Iraq War, for instance, martyrdom was commemorated as a marriage to God, materially represented in wedding symbols called "hejleh"⁴³³ which were erected on the streets and alleys in towns and cities with photos of the dead identified as "groom- martyrs."⁴³⁴ Thus, parents of state martyrs were offered congratulations and condolences (tabrik va tasliyat) upon receiving the news of their

⁴³³ "Hejlehs" were not invented by the Islamic Republic. It was common to set up hejlehs for young, unmarried dead males. What was innovative was the way "hejlehs" were turned into symbols of the martyrdom of males, regardless of their age.

⁴³⁴ Interestingly like women whose photos are not to appear in public, even as dead, the representation of the feminized God, the bride, is also absent from these wedding symbols.

son's death. Language functioned both as a weapon and as a substitution and sublimation in relations to different regimes of power and knowledge, in myriad capacities and forms.

Another example of this battle over boundaries is highlighted in the way the Regime redefined the notion and application of martyrdom as dying for Islam which came to signify dying for the Islamic Republic of Iran. While this definition of the meaning of martyrdom privileges the nation-state and is therefore a narrowing of the category, it has also allowed for an expansion and stretching of the boundaries of martyrdom by extending the title of martyr to those state officials who were killed by a natural or accidental death.⁴³⁵ The justification given for this expansion of what constitutes martyrdom is that government officials are always at the service of the state. So even the natural death of state officials is martyrdom, for their life is dedicated to serving the state. Eventually these demarcations were challenged and redeployed by people to stretch the limits of state definitions and make sense and redefine their own losses. Thus, for example, the survivors of the devastating earthquake in Bam referred to their dead as martyrs.

In response to my question as to why her dead loved ones were martyrs while they had died of a natural disaster, a woman, who had lost all her five children in the earthquake, told me: "They all died innocent (*bigonāh*). They had no sins and died as victims (*mazlum*).” Another woman offered a different explanation about her husband: "He died having just performed his ablution to start his morning prayer; he was ready to

⁴³⁵ It is important to note that while in the Qur`an and hadith, martyrdom is granted for reasons other than dying consciously and voluntarily for a just cause, this later definition has been the dominant one in the last two centuries, but more so in Iran since the 1960s. Thus the new state delineation stretches the boundaries of their previous definition allowing therefore for more open claims by others. The cases of this contestation over martyrdom are numerous and have as many pragmatic reasons (like access to good schools) as emotional ones.

pray for God, in a state of purity. He died pure, a ‘shahid’ (martyr).” Still the third woman suggested that her baby son had died like “Imam Hussein’s six months old Ali Asghar; for like that of Ali Asghar, his throat was also torn apart.”

Even beyond these personal explanations, most people in Bam argued that their dead were martyrs because, “the government hates the people of Bam and wanted to see us dead,” or “why not call them martyr? They were in fact slaughtered as ‘victims’ (mazlums) for the regime knew of the immanent earthquake but did not tell us about it.”⁴³⁶ If one strips off these statements of all their variations, the common thread that weaves these views of martyrdom together is the compartmentalization of its previously intertwined elements. Under the Shah, martyrdom was defined both by the leftist and religious intellectuals as a conscious, voluntary self sacrifice in fighting social oppression and injustice. None of these single elements, in and of themselves, were sufficient to make one a martyr. It was in the combination of all its basic defining elements that martyrdom could be granted. Under the Islamic Republic, these different elements were themselves sacrificed for one another and employed separately, both by government authorities and the people for different agendas. Language has been and still is the locus and locale of these discursive maneuvers and the cemeteries are their battlegrounds.

While in the jokes of the youth, the violence of the words take the place of physical violence, not rarely language has succumbed to violence and inflamed its destructive power. Right after the 1979 Revolution, for example, when clapping, dancing, and laughter were deemed non-Islamic and non-revolutionary, fists and long militant chants and bullets became the main means of communication. One of the many

⁴³⁶ “Dying as a victim” (mazlum mordan) conveys the idea of dying unjustly, innocently, and untimely.

intimidating chants that frequently targeted political prisoners kept growing as if a knitting work in progress. New lines and spontaneous innovations were welcomed, as long as the theme and the tone of the “original” chant remained intact. In this chant, the hostility of the supporters of the regime, as “Hezbollah” (the party of God), was articulated towards various groups and countries classified as enemies.⁴³⁷

The usual parts which were commonly uttered read as: “God is the Greatest! Khomeini is the leader! The only party is the party of God; the only leader is “Roohullāh” (Khomeini’s first name which also means the spirit of God).” Then came the whole series of “down withs” such as: “Down with the opponents of the Supreme Religious Leader, Down with the hypocrite (Monāfegh)—[it referred to those who were affiliated with Mojāhedin Organization], Down with Communists, Down with America, Down with Israel, Down with those affiliated with Toudah Party,” and on and on depending on the targets, occasions, and the chanters. After each part, chanters reiterated: “The only party is the party of God. Khomeini is the only leader.”⁴³⁸

An important distinction exists between the violence that is conveyed by the jokes about the state and state officials, including veterans and state martyrs, and the slogans

⁴³⁷ This was similar to some classic genres of Persian poetry, such as *Robāyee* and *Ghasideh* in which the length is flexible as long as the rhythm and the rhyme stay unchanged.

⁴³⁸ The Farsi version is “Allah-u Akbar, Khomeini Rahbar, hezb faghat hezbollah, rahabar faghat Roohullāh, marg bar zed-e velayāt-e faghih, marg bar monāfegh, marg bar Amrica, marg bar Esraeel, marg bar toudayee,...and then hezb faghat hezbollah, rahbar faghat rohullāh” was repeated until one’s head began to spin. Most of these chants were in fact lengthy. The one often employed to horrify dissidents but also even those uttering it, with its content and its tone named one by one, in Hierarchical order from Khomeini, to the parliament, veterans to the people as belonging to the Party of God, which at the time was Hezb-e Jumhori-e Islami (the Islamic Republic Party) and with a militant tone. While facing the inmates, the massive group of guards and collaborators would shout “hezb faghat hezbollah, rahbar faghat Roohullāh”, (the Party is only the party of God, and the leaser is only Khomeini...). The repetition of these lines with an extremely punchy tone tended to induce a sense of being hit by bullets. Note, however, in this specific chant, the way the notion of one God and One Leader only evokes the memory of a very significant phrase deeply rooted in every Iranian’s memory and the way every Muslim is to be recognized as a Muslim and that is “there is no God but God and Mohammad is His Prophet.”

used by state authorities and their supporters. Something of that absence of the original object that is the very characteristic of language shifted here in this authoritative usage of words. It was the word always uttered to summon its object not as a metaphor to stand for it but as the sound of the coming of the object. The calls of death in these chants almost always at once expressed and accelerated the frenzy rage towards their targets and were followed by attacks and execution. Language in this sense was both the means of communication and the part of the ritual of sacrifice, both as sacralization and desacralization, in cleaning and purifying the nation of its profane enemies and offering its children to the divine to get closer to divinity. The violence of the language and the language of violence worked together, in this sense, to ascertain the image of unity of the “ommat” against its enemy-other.

But, in some small circles of close friends and in whispers, language was appropriated to both interfere and mitigate violence and undermine and mock that very image of unity the authority attempted to represent.⁴³⁹ The keen mimicry of key hegemonic discourses has been a common technique for these jokes. I would argue that, in their re-appropriation and mimicry of the style, tone, rhythm, and sound of hegemonic discourses, and the distortion of their meanings to the point of absurd hilarity, they turn the hegemonic words against themselves. This technique, I would suggest, has been particularly refined by the “children of the Revolution,” in their lives and language.

Playing with the Sacred

About ten years ago or so, once, while riding on a bus which was overpopulated with high school kids, I heard them whispering Hamd-o-soureh [Qu`ranic verses that are recited for prayers]. First I found it strange that these kids would recite prayer verses in the bus but then I

⁴³⁹ Those small circles have now grown larger and multiplied.

thought perhaps they are going to soon begin to pray and are practicing to memorize them.⁴⁴⁰ Only when I listened carefully, I realized that they were in fact saying some nonsensical, even obscene words, which were exactly attuned to the rhythm and sound of those verses.⁴⁴¹ I remember at the time, when I recognized how bluntly these kids were playing with the sacred words, I shivered inside. But now such things have become so common among kids that one can hear without even blinking one's eyes.

The above observation was related to me in 2004 by Marjān, the wife of a state martyr, whose son had gone to the special schools reserved for martyrs' children, the "Witness School" (Madrese-ye-Shāhed).⁴⁴² As we saw in the previous chapter, here as well, language vacillates between the sacred and the profane and thereby manipulates and erodes their divided zones. This disruption of boundaries was apparent in the joke about the veteran's account of the front in the previous chapter which drew from prevailing views in Iranian society about authority and specifically about clergy members and revolutionary guards. A stereotypical view of the hypocrisy of the clergy is the theme of another joke,⁴⁴³ which is about the martyrdom of Hussein Fahmideh, a thirteen year old Iran-Iraq War martyr, to whom Khomeini referred as "our leader." According to the joke, the "black box"⁴⁴⁴ of the event, is discovered in which a recording of Fahmideh's

⁴⁴⁰ Boys are to begin praying at the age of fifteen.

⁴⁴¹ This imitation of the sounds and rhythms of sacred or official chants were a common practice so much so that imitating the lyrics of a motto-song that was regularly played on television and radio right before the news, beginning with "allah-u-akbar Khomeini Rahabar", was changed into "allaf-o badbakht, khomeini bar takht," (goofing around and unlucky Khomeini is in power)

⁴⁴² These schools were exceptional in their high quality of education and in being tuition-free.

⁴⁴³ This manner of joke-telling in which jokes follow or even interrupt one another, in a chain like series of jokes being offered, reminiscent of the events of a revolution, or the gifts, and the manner in which shabih khani incorporates different elements and events in itself, is also an attempt to keep in line and to mime the way the jokes evoke one another, and the histories of their production.

⁴⁴⁴ The joke was disseminated after September 11th when there still were many questions in Iran about the black boxes of the airplanes which became the weapons in the attack on that day and many conspiratorial ideas suggesting what "had really happened and who planed the event," which often ended up either with Zionists alone or the joined work of the Zionists and the US government. The notion of discovery of black

voice in the last moments before his death reveals that he was in fact pushed under the tank by a “hāji.” Like the earlier joke, here as well, the entire story of Fahmideh’s voluntary and courageous act of throwing himself and his grenade under an Iraqi tank in order to save the troops is reversed. If in the first joke, the veteran is a willing participant in “hāji’s” lustful sexuality; in Fahmideh’s case, he is portrayed as an innocent victim of hāji’s malicious self-serving crime. The joke turns into a critique of the clergy, reflecting the commonly held view that the youth was manipulated and pushed toward martyrdom.

These jokes subvert the official sanctification of the clergy and echo a prevailing perception of them as preachers who do not act in accordance with their own preaching. In these jokes, the image of the clergy is transformed from religious guides into deceitful people.⁴⁴⁵ Just as the regime deprives its enemies from their singularities, of their names and faces, likewise the jokes speak of hāji, as the religious clergy. Language itself, in other words, becomes the subject of mockery. Both in content and in style, the language of the clergy is the topic of numerous jokes and humorous idioms. The mixture of Arabic words, bookish tones, and informal colloquial Farsi, which is employed by clergy members as a rhetorical technique to at once assert boundaries with and yet remain

box in the Iraq-Iraq war where no planes or ships were involved in Fahmideh’s death indicates the multilayered commentary that the joke makes at once at the global and domestic issues and their interrelation.

⁴⁴⁵ To such individuals Iranians commonly refer as “vā`ez-e- bi `amal” (preacher without action). Almost everyone in Iran who speaks Farsi can recite you a line of poem by Hafiz, and they often do, in which he speaks of how the clergy preaches something in the mosques only to go home and do something else. It reads as: “Vā`ezān kin jelveh dar mehrāb o member mikonand chun beh khalvat miravand ān kār-e digar mikonand (the preachers who so show off in chamber and alter, in private, they do that other thing, a reference to the things they themselves announce as “harām,” (religiously banned) such as illegitimate sexual relation, drinking, and so forth.

appealing to lay people, has often been ridiculed by intellectuals of the secular system of education, and seen as an indication of backwardness.

Before the Revolution, many Iranian intellectuals failed to see the language of the clergy as an effective means of communicating their at once mystifying and pragmatic agendas. They assumed their language, as their views, to be the manifestation of their inability to fit into the modern world. No wonder, then, that many Iranian intellectuals were surprised to witness Khomeini's "inadequate speech form" able to reach such a wide audience and even fascinate some western intellectuals, like Foucault. The reader would remember the indications of this disbelief in the earlier chapters. In order to make sense of the puzzling outcome that was Khomeini's appeal, these individuals have either deemed Iranian people culturally backward and religiously superstitious and non-modern; or they explained the popularity of the "anachronistic" clergy as the result of their professional talent in fooling people, especially the illiterate poor.⁴⁴⁶ The shock that the revelation of these jokes induce seems to revenge this other shock, the shock of losing to the "backwards" clergy.

The Aftermath of Revelation

Yet, these nonsensical jokes offer more productive interventions in the silencing space of violence. They call the mystifying violence by its real name. They bring it back from their claimed temple of divinity all the way back to the ground; they reveal it for what it is, in its profane and corrupted power. They present it as an absurd naked reality.

⁴⁴⁶ Imam Jomeh Hasani (the Friday Prayer imam in Oromeieh, the capital city of West Azarbeijan), for instance, has been portrayed as the prototype, and the proof, of this perception. His Friday sermons have been published as a book and are offered as a gift to friends, as if a book of jokes, illustrating his "antique, illogical, and anti-modern" views. I have to confess though that when I was offered the book, and began reading it, I was not sure if these were really his words or people making jokes by twisting his words around. But it turns out, upon verification, that they are his words. This does not mean that people do not take liberties in producing their own versions and assigning them to him.

Let's recall the joke of the veteran from the earlier chapter; how the revelation of the joke resembled the revelation of forbidden knowledge to Adam and Eve, which introduced sexuality and shame to the archaic male and female, and threw them out of heaven. The revelation of the secret in the aforementioned joke also strips off all that was concealed under the non-communicative "sacred" text." With the mask of the "graceful" violence of martyrdom removed, the reality of the relationship between the sacred and violence comes, so to speak, out of the closet. Violence is now in the open, confirming Rene Girard's remark that "the sacred takes the place of violence after violence has taken place first" (Cited in McKenna, 1992:69).⁴⁴⁷ Like Adam and Eve whose falling from grace makes them mortal, fallible, and human, the joke also brings down the violence of the War from its heavenly grace to its earthly realities. It is this blunt gaze at profanity, this "shameless nudity" of, and revealed by, the youth⁴⁴⁸ that outrages most individuals of the revolutionary generation, both supporters and dissidents of the regime. Joining voices from two opposite sides, they claim that this young generation has no ethical values whatsoever.

It is of this very "danger" that many martyrs' letters, published by the government, warn: "Dear youngsters, do not unwittingly follow the Satan; do not allow low tāghoti (the oppressive) values, e.g. bad veiling and corruption, the gift of the colonialists, be spread in the country" (Martyr Ali Ashraf Saraj, quoted in Fahimi,

⁴⁴⁷ Even though Girard seems to speak of the relationship between the sacred and violence as though in their initial stage, but since the sacred takes its form, be it after violence or before, it itself becomes the instigator of violence.

⁴⁴⁸ The abstract and generalized word, youth, to which I refer throughout this chapter is in line, but not necessarily in agreement, with the way most Iranians commonly talk about youngsters as though they all belong to the same family. In fact, many families spoke of the youth as "they behave so much like one another, as though they all have come from the same parents, or are products of the same factory." This constant reference to the similarity among the youth emphasizes mainly urban Tehrani young individuals, and implies the widespread effects of individualistic western culture.

1997:75). This is also the very fatal peril which the government-run television constantly evokes, and the elimination of which, ritualistic acts of purification are performed. The state or the supporters of the Regime are not alone in expressing such a concern.

Niyoshā, the widow of a martyred leftist dissident who identifies herself as the opponent of the Regime, shares many similar concerns. In fact, during our numerous conversations, she repeatedly lamented that most Iranian youngsters have become “corrupt” (fāsed) and contaminate (beh fesād mikeshan) anything they touch.” The joke in chapter seven simultaneously confirms and negates this claim.

Like the youth, the joke, as their product, also turns the accusation back on its accusers. Its playful insinuation of promiscuous sexuality mixed with the violence of the war is not a mere criticism of the past, but also and in fact more so, is a commentary and reflection on the present. By highlighting the petrified memories of the past; stripping off their sacred facades, it revives them in humorous and subversive versions, to allow for alternative and less hegemonic readings and divergent histories. As if a flash of lightening, the humor temporarily sheds light on the densely fictional nature of the “Sacred War.” Like the flash that does not eliminate the darkness of the night, the joke does not replace the official accounts of the War. Rather, it illuminates their fictive reality by offering its own starkly contrasting fiction. Like a nomad, it never attempts to permanently occupy the space but warns instead the authority of its existence and its immanent resurging potential. In chapter seven, we read of this dynamic which is analogous to the way the state and Iranian society, especially the youth, relate to one another in all aspects of social life, language and daily experience.

With their general disillusionment with the non-desirable consequences of a total revolution, the Iranian youth of today seem to no longer adhere to the idea of an overnight erosion of the old system or a utopian dream for a perfect society. In their own commonly used expression, what they would rather pursue is “ro kam koni”, i.e. embarrassing and undermining the arrogance of authority by highlighting the holes in its claim to absolute power. In this sense, the joke is not so much about forgetting the past as is about remembering it differently. It does not seek to transcend official memory but rather to underscore its absurdly homogenizing quality by juxtaposing its own absurdly homogenizing version. In its game of miming, the joke poses itself like a mirror in front the official account, not necessarily to suggest itself as a reality, but rather to expose the ludicrously totalizing account of itself in order to highlight that of the other. Within the space that is opened by this revelation, the contrasting, multifarious and polygonal characters of real life stories find venues to emerge.

This generation has its own story to tell and it tells it in such a way that pulls out the rug from under the feet of the authority. But it does so not in the gravely serious revolutionary manner of their parents, but as a fun game. In Payām’s words, “we do not delude ourselves that we are changing the world; nor do we do things for tomorrow. We just try to make the very space we live in a little more tolerable.” In Poyesh’s poetic expression “a little light and a little space within which one can freely swing, this is our everyday dream and daily mission.” Many of the parents consider them a “selfish” generation, and this generation often does not even attempt to deny it. For they subscribe to the prevailing view that loving oneself is the precondition to loving others; that if you

are not happy, you can't make others happy. And there are many centers that have mushroomed in large cities to teach this philosophy of life.

Yet, in their self-serving, playful acts of living life as fun, they threaten the very foundation of the Islamic Republic; they take away its mystic mask to show the depth of violence and corruption inside. Rather than aiming to overthrow the regime, they release mice under their comfortable cozy mattresses,⁴⁴⁹ and force them to jump out of their zones of comfort. But they act so lightheartedly, so simultaneously “naughtily and leisurely” that it all seems like mere playful acts of the young. As with *shabih khāni*, their transgression occurs within the structure and is at once unpredictable and calculative. It challenges the very system it leaves in place. Yet, how much challenge or conformity they offer to the system can be read, as with jokes, dreams, and revolutions, only backward, after the fact.

Resentful Amnesia

As mentioned earlier, while the joke overturns the formal war accounts and its claims to divine desires, it by no means achieves this by simple substitution of, for instance, “Ārezo” (proper female name) with “ārezo” (wish). On the contrary, the two are so inseparably fused that one cannot be imagined without the other. Ārezo is a particular personification and embodiment of the ārezo (desire) while ārezo is the

⁴⁴⁹ In a provocative and interesting movie, “Women’s Prison” (*Zendān-e Zanān*), Manizheh Hekmat, a brilliant Iranian woman director, portrays an imaginary history of “ordinary women’s prisoners” in post-revolutionary Iran in which a “well-intended,” cruel prison head and a “principled” prisoner, though no less hardcore and stubborn as the prison chief, struggles for years to change the situation in jail, to no avail. Finally, a group of teenagers are arrested, one of whom is a child that was born in jail. This group is so radically different, in innocence and yet playfulness, in their humor and sense of mockery of the system, that these shake up the entire ward. At the very end, the child of prison finds a way to sneak into the meeting of the high ranking women prison officials and frees a mouse under their feet and leaves the microphone on. She returns to the ward only to have the whole ward hear the screams of these officials. I find this story amazingly analogous to the realities of the Iranian society and its authorities in relation to the youth.

general, abstract, and vacant bodiless body that remains to be vacated; it invites new desires and entices the formation of further fantasies. Like money, *ārezo* must name the value, and it thus must be named itself; it must possess and be possessed. Otherwise it will name nothing, or it will name everything; for in and of itself, like money, it is a dead sign, it is nothingness. To become enlivened, it has to be claimed. The claim to *ārezo* is a socio-historical, floating claim.

These different *ārezos* seek their materializations in and out of the chasm that is generated either intentionally or by the temporary slippages in discipline and punishment of the coercive systems; it is within this very chasm that the jokes intrude and find their breathing and breeding space. The possibility of this incursion is provided by the fact that the formal narratives rely confidently on their dominance, through the monopoly of the media.⁴⁵⁰ The dilemma of memory and its historically shifting nature is recognized even by some of the regime's own ideologues. In writing about war literature, Ahmad Nakha'i, articulates this problematic when he suggests that "those days [during the War] the term "basiji" symbolized martyrdom, simplicity, friendship,...but nowadays words like "basij" and "basiji" evoke something else in mind"(2001:363). This "something else" is at the heart of our jokes and the subject of constant complains of the "revolutionary generation" who speak of the old time in a nostalgic tone.

⁴⁵⁰ There is a relevant proverb in Farsi that refers to this common knowledge that allows the abbreviation. It says you say F, and I'll know you mean Farahzād. This proverb, so brief and simple, conveys two different ideas: that Farahzād is so well known and so often referred to that when someone begins by the letter F, she or he, most likely, or as the proverb suggests always, will be meaning to say Farahzād; also that the person claims that the one who is beginning to say something, as brief as the letter F, is so well known for the listener, so transparent, or her or his intentions so clear to the listener, that the listener can read the rest of what she or he intended to say; in other words her or his words are as clear and known to the listener as Farahzād is for everyone. Farahzād is a neighborhood in north of Tehran that used to be a very popular place for Tehrani residents and visitors.

These writings seem to elude, though not explicitly, to a social phenomenon I call “resentful amnesia.” This amnesia has much more to do with the condition of the present than with the past. To be more accurate, it is the very condition of the present that recalls and reflects on particular moments or experiences of the past and determines their selective remembrance or forgetting. If Benjamin, in his discussion of Marcel Proust on memory suggests that memory can also be voluntarily provoked, I will add that amnesia might also be consciously induced.⁴⁵¹ Resentful amnesia is not merely a response to the over-flooded imposed memories that by repetition and their flattened characters produce numbness, a loss of senses similar to the insensitivity of our ears to an extremely high pitch sound. This amnesia is also about the huge gap between stereotypical imposed images vis-à-vis everyday experiences, the very repetition of which turns them into stereotypical images, as well. The opening statement about burying martyrdom through burying martyrs in the University grounds recognizes the negative effect of imposed remembrance and hyper-memorialization in producing resentful amnesia.

Years after the war, in a small book titled “A letter to Paradise,” Isā Jamālī, a former veteran writes to a martyr. In this letter, he laments the way the Islamic path that was paved by the blood of martyrs is being destroyed by new trends. Although unnamed, we learn that the martyr is not just any martyr but a commander. So, it is as though the veteran is reporting the situation to his commander, even after his death. In fact he uses the word report “gozāresh” in his letter. While he addresses the commander, it is as if he is reporting to all martyrs through him.

⁴⁵¹ Neither the voluntary, nor the involuntary quality of this remembrance or forgetting is unlimited and absolute. What one forces to be forgotten is not necessarily buried forever; nor is one’s memory the obedient slave of one’s conscious or unconscious desires.

They speak of you⁴⁵² martyrs in words, but in reality they [government officials, public?] do not show the deserving attention. I have to say that unfortunately they sometimes even misuse your name and your exceptional heroism. You might ask, ‘so you are saying that we have been forsaken?’... I have to report that no! Many name you in their gatherings, and know you as sacrificing ones who brought dignity and pride for the country, but they do not acquire deserving benefit from this naming and, rarely, they show persistence on their promises and actions. Instead they stray from the right path and give their hearts to deviated paths. (2002:20-1)

If one stretched far enough, imagining and constructing the war as if it were fought by the revolutionary guards and the basijis of today, one might find something of the negative image of the joke in the above lamentation. In an almost similar fashion, on the dissidents’ side, Damāvand, the son of an executed leftist father, expresses confusion about the way his uncle compromised in jail and survived the mass execution of 1988 to come out and build a luxurious life and “live for work and money.” Damāvand says: “I get particularly angry when my uncle dares to speak those empty words about my father and other martyrs while his life stands in such a stark contrast to those values for which my father and others like him fought and were martyred.” If there were a joke about dissidents, a similar lamentation would be echoed from Damāvand’s words after the mask of humor was removed from the joke. In my memory, Mrs. Tāheri, the mother of a state martyr, joins the two above lamentations in her conversation with me, the

⁴⁵² Only twenty four pages, this book is written as a letter to a martyr and illustrates most of the issues raised in and about language in this chapter. Faithful to the style of letters, and prevailing in Farsi writing, in general, the punctuation is almost non-existent, creating a fascinating dilemma and also the potential for creative and subversive reading. To this and many other complexities of its features I cannot attend here. But, it is noteworthy to mention that in the phrase “they speak of you, the martyrs” there is a grammatical error, in that the “you” is singular (to), not “shomā” which is the plural you, while martyrs (shahidān) is employed in its plural form. This grammatically inaccurate utilization has a double effect of reminding the reader of the simplicity and the poor education of a lay pāsdār or basiji, the unrestrained character of the genre of the letters, and yet a more profound matter: It creates a sense of simultaneous unity and collectivity of the martyrs, which becomes further fortified in the anonymousness of the martyr. It is that abstraction that like a vacant container holds all and yet melds them all into one form, one name.

anthropologist. She curses those who fight with one another over positions, wealth, and power “while using martyrs’ blood to gain such materialistic gains. “The sad thing is that the martyrs left all their materialistic belonging behind when they embraced martyrdom.”

A “Subordinate” Victory

All these above voices are reflections of loss, in one way or another. Yet, a radical distinction separates the joke from other voices, both from the letter and the curse. In both latter forms, the loss has a nostalgic tone about some ideal situation that no longer exists; they both express sadness about that which is lost but whose existence they seem to still remember. But the loss in jokes is a different and deeper one. It is the loss of that which never was. I would call this a “counterfeited loss,” like when one loses a fake paper money, a loss of value that was never there. For while the “revolutionary generation” might still remember the fervor, excitement, delight, and the incredible magnetic force of momentarily united dreams and their power in massive action, the producers of the joke, the “Children of the Revolution” have come to it after its euphoric period has vanished. What they have is the unbridgeable fissure between the golden image that they have been shown and the fake coin in their hand.

Thus the joke’s tone is neither nostalgic, nor even directly sad, but rather agonized and revengeful, as if reacting to having been taken for a fool, responding to deception not by crying or nagging but by paying back through a bitter mockery, by a similarly deceitful farce. The joke has come to this world after God has already died; it therefore has no memory or dreams of Godly time; nor does it have a vision of its heaven. The light it sees at the end of the tunnel is tarnished with the recognition of the “eternal return” of the darkness of totalizing power. No wonder that the educated intellectual

youth of today in Iran is so fascinated by Nietzsche and his philosophy. The joke's temporary euphoria and its joy of instantaneous victory are already curtailed by the awareness of its temporality. This victory, if one can speak of one, is haunted by the presence of the authoritative version that has mapped out the territory as its own. The moment of resurgence of a rebellious voice in the joke comes to resemble, in this sense, the gatherings of the families of the dissidents on the anniversary of the mass execution of prisoners in 1988, or on the occasion of the Iranian New Year, when they collectively sing "their revolutionary" songs.

As the spark of this possibility shines in their eyes, they cautiously look around to detect any suspicious figures who could be government agents. They tone down their voices or speed up their rhythms and perform their ceremony that is always overshadowed by the immanence of the price they might pay for this moment of "free" expression. A moment that is always brief and risky. I refer to these moments as subordinate, poisonous, and yet enlivened moments of victory. The euphoria of this victory is bitter and adorned with a sense of cynical, negative, double loss. Even though, and as mentioned before, the loss experienced by the "revolutionary children" and the "children of the Revolution" is different in relationship to the Revolution; in regard to what I call negative loss, one finds striking similarities. In the former, your child is executed but you are not even allowed to mourn. He/she does not even have a particular grave and yet you are banned from visiting this unknown grave. Zohreh, who has lost three brothers to execution and was arrested and beaten up several times for visiting their graves, suggests that this injustice is so bizarre and absurd that it forces one to act crazy, for normal anger or cries do not seem like sufficient reactions. In this sense, being

cheated by a counterfeit reality, about which one cannot even openly express anger, makes the humor of the joke rather embittered.

Behind this laughter vibrate the congealed cries of real voices that fight to be heard, that struggle to be remembered anew. This is the fight that is consistent and stubborn, like those of the mothers of the dissidents in their effort to publicly remember and mourn their children. It is the fight of the youth of today, persistent but playful, in Iranian's expression "if you throw them out of the door, they will come back through the window" (*az dar birooneshon koni, az panjereh miyān too*). If they are forced out of the public arena, they turn the private into the public. If they are deprived of privacy, they will utilize the public space as their private zone. Shirin's solution to the constant breaking of her executed husband's tombstone is to bring the cemetery into her living room. The tombstone of her husband now stands separate from where his body lies, but it is in the eye of whoever walks to Shirin's house, a constant reminder of injustice and crime. The jokes too enter every home and make every public space a private space of their own publicity.

The vengeful spirit of the joke speaks for its producers' anguish, who are themselves also breaking taboos in their daily lives, inside and outside of jokes. As a rebellious fleeting medium of liberation and a safe heaven of expression of forbidden emotions, such jokes are often created and disseminated at the margins and by the marginalized. They penetrate the boundaries of the establishment and momentarily assert their control over them so as to remind the authorities that their fortresses are not impermeable. This sneaky incursion of profanity onto the "sacred" terrain⁴⁵³ engenders

⁴⁵³ This momentary substitution and coexistence perhaps differs from what Koesteler calls bisociation. Even though the two irreconcilable emotional and spiritual realities and fantasies have come face to face

more than laughter; it at once releases and ignites the anger of its re-producers by reminding them of the cheating implicit in the poisonous quality of the joke.

As if a double edged sword, these jokes serve the system by releasing the intense suppressed energy of dangerous emotions into dispersed and lightened expressions in “mere” jokes. But they also entail the potential to ignite flames by compiling these disillusionments and invoking the very bitter memories that offer them nourishment. They speak without having asserted themselves as real speech forms. As such, the economy of jokes is similar to that of the market. The market economy, as we know, can turn chaotic and stretch beyond its two extreme ends of the spectrum of over production and over consumption. Reinforcing balance in the market economy has led to organizing and centralizing plans for the supposedly free market; the balance is often resumed by destroying overproduction or pouring more products into circulation. As subjects of the market economy and the economy of investment, jokes can also be destroyed or released like products into the public arena to create a sense of balance within society. The recent trend of sending jokes through “SMS” (messages send by typing on cell phones), even about and to President Ahmadinezhad that make mockery of his slogans, and especially of his unfulfilled promises, are illustrative of this double function.⁴⁵⁴ Even he sometimes uses these jokes to suggest commonality with the people, while for those who send the jokes via SMS, they work as means of participating in a protest in which they often

with one another, colliding, and pushing each other in and out, the system the joke thrusts itself into is a domain already claimed. Thus it is, in de Certeau’s terms, a producer of the reading kind, and yet its reading is the effect of and affects the strategies of the systems of production.

⁴⁵⁴ His constant promise that he will soon be announcing good news has turned into a joke among the people and a common idiom of what Iranians call a “hundred unfulfilled promises” (sad v`adeh, na yek vafa).

cannot viscerally partake. This youth and their jokes mirror one another in the sense that they are rebellious against the gloomy and mournful atmosphere of the society.

For Poyān, the son of a leftist dissident, the taboos must be broken in all their forms. He considers this act of breaking taboos a “personal, social, ethical and political mission.” But he says that the main point in undertaking this task is to take it not as a task but rather as a game that one playfully plays with danger. In Poyān’s view, “the attitude of the player of this game has to be irritatingly stubborn yet ephemeral. The player should not be bounded to any single act or word. There is only one law to this mission and that is to be consistent.” Concerned that he might be misunderstood, he emphasizes that “by consistency, I do not mean to do and say the same thing under dangerously extreme pressure and never learn how to waver. For my generation, consistency means they kick your ass on one front, you take it to the other, they defeat you here, you move to somewhere less expected. The trick is to keep moving and keep them on the move.”

Moving is what the new generation does best; they have become experts at making little moves that suddenly result in a real metamorphosis, like the religious mournful songs that one hears nowadays in Beheshtzahrā. Without hearing the words of these songs, one might easily mistake them for the Persian pop music of Los Angeles or even recent bands in Iran, just like Marjān had taken the obscene words of the song for Qura`nic verses.

When I challenged Poyān by asking: “But you are talking about this whole thing as if you are part of a group or organization with particular views and tactics of resisting. How is this different from political activism of your father and his comrades? How is

your way more mature than theirs?” Poyān laughed, his usual laughter, which used to suddenly transform this tall, muscular, young man into an innocent but playful kid. His language, which I jokingly called “āsh-e-sholeh ghalamkār” (hodgepodge—a kind of Iranian soup made of a mixture of rice and different kinds of vegetables), was a combination of slang and intellectually sophisticated terms. This form of speech, which has become common to many youngsters in Iran, is somewhat exaggerated in some of them including Poyān. And now in that interestingly refreshing form and in an exciting tone as if talking about an action movie, he tells me:

It’s funny how for you guys, there is nothing outside of organization or collective. But for my generation, we do not have or even need a collective plan or organization. Of course we talk about these things with friends. But most of what we do is our personal acts that take the form of the collective. Let me give you an example. Let’s say that I am walking on the street with my girlfriend. I feel like holding her hand, and I look around and it seems ok to do so. I take the risk and hold her hand. If no guard comes to question us, we go on and soon, those other couples who are walking on the street would do the same thing. Now there are many like me holding hands in public. Then I or somebody else might reach for the shoulder or the waist of her partner and again if nothing happens others join. It is all about what one wants to do and the testing of the temperature to see how risky it might be to actually do it, for we don’t want to take fatal risks. So you see, there is no such thing as sitting and making strategies or long terms plans for the future. It is just a question of seizing the moment and acting on good opportunities. When it becomes consistent and collective, it is a norm that is hard to change. That is how we force our way of life on that which the regime imposes on us. All there is to it is to have a little fun and to achieve a little “burning of their asses” (koon soozī).⁴⁵⁵ The main trick is to do what you like to do, but be persistent and clever about it. You know, your generation, you thought that confronting a regime is about serious political issues and you had to all be ready to go to jail and die for it. But, most of us confront the rules anywhere and any time we can and of course we pay for it but not with huge sacrifices, not with martyrdom. We have fun in being playful. They kick us out of the

⁴⁵⁵ The expression of “burning the ass” is used to allude to doing something to embarrass or make someone else angry or jealous about which the person can often do nothing. Of course Poyān is referring to the state way the youth “burns the ass” of the state authorities.

door, we come back through the window. The youngsters in Iran are now like the hair in the “state officials’ nose” (moye damāgh-e-regimiyā); they can’t control us. They can’t get rid of us.

Poyān’s over-generalizing dichotomies of “your generation” and “my generation” tend to undermine the multifarious diversities which exists within each generation, such as class, gender and geography which can be more essential in shaping subjectivities than mere generational gap. Yet, there are particular trends among urban youth that are rooted in the sociopolitical and cultural shifts of the country in an increasingly global context. The differences between the “revolutionary generation” and the “children of the Revolution”, in Poyān’s words, seem to account for their two modes of resistance: that of the politically organized which is based on grand narratives versus those of the localized, dispersed, multi-purpose, and more pragmatic movements. Resistance in the latter form is geared less towards what it can achieve than to the possibility of what it does in the moment. For Poyān “it is really important to feel pleasure in what I am doing.”

Mohammad, the son of a high ranking state martyr, pulls out his whiskey bottle as soon as we hit the road in our four day trip to the northwest of Iran. His CD player is playing hip hop music and soon the minibus turns into a disco where everyone is dancing. When, one of the women expresses concern that we might get caught for drinking alcohol, because we are reaching the toll booth, Mohammad dismisses her remarks and says: “leave it to me and let’s enjoy ourselves.” I recall our conversation from a few days ago regarding the way his father might have felt about his son’s life style. “I am proud of my father,” he told me, “but I am my own person and want to live my life and I will live it as I like it.” The issue is that even the generation who once believed in grand narratives does not live it. Its nostalgic remembrance nevertheless attempts to evoke guilt

in people, similar to that which Shari`ati and other intellectuals ignited before the Revolution. The youth however does not seem to buy into the old notions of martyrdom and self-sacrifice of the Revolution and the War.

The Equalization of Jokes

Everyday experiences today are radically different from those portrayed by the state as the War era. In a *Collection of the Iran-Iraq War Memories*, Fatemeh Jabbāri, who was the head nurse of Tāleghāni Hospital in Bākhtarān (previously Kermānshāh), a town that is located near the front zones during the Iran-Iraq War and thus under constant attack, writes about her memories of her encounters with war veterans in the hospital. She relates:

Taleghani hospital contained the injured veterans. From a twelve year old kid to a 90 year old elderly man, all of whom were of the same spirit and of a single light. The climax of their shouting from pain and suffering was their praying for the health of the Imam⁴⁵⁶ [Khomeini] and their only “wish” (ārezo) was their faster return to the front... One day, they brought Ghadir Amiri, a 70 year elderly man, a basiji,.. His leg had to be amputated... The doctors asked for his

⁴⁵⁶ This imam and Imam, though also part of the doubling with which this chapter has been involved, has further complexity. While in writing, the imam and Imam are identical, in Farsi امام, as titles, they are significantly different. Imam though not a proper name but resembles it in that it used to be the title used solely to refer to the twelve saintly individuals, the descendants of the Prophet Mohammad, and the Shi`i's flawless spiritual guides, the first of whom is Imam Ali, and the last one is the absent Imam, or Mahdi, or Imam Zamān, the Imam of the Age. The other version, imam, however, like a general noun, is a referent to all those who guide the public prayers. Sometimes, the mojtaheds could be entitled as imam. For the Shi`i, there could be no other Imam, because the last Imam is absent and his return would occur through a militant revolutionary uprising, which would mean the emergence of a utopian world and the end of injustice. Any claim to be an Imam, in this sense, according to Shi`ism would be perceived as blasphemy, for it is a claim to being the last Imam. Here lay the real perplexity. If neither in writing nor in pronunciation they are indistinguishable, and if they are merely titles and not proper names, what proof do we have to suggest that Khomeini claimed or was referred to as Imam and not imam? Yet this was the source of the tension especially among the high ranking clergy in Iran. For those who worshipped him as Imam, and others who complained that Khomeini had been raised to a position of an Imam, to the point of blasphemy, the language offered only its ambiguity. This interesting ambivalence in writing similar but thinking different raises complicated issues for the politics and poetics of communication and its reading. This doubling, the product of translation, while allows for the discussion to proceed further, and offers more transparency, has the effect of binary opposition, and categorization that renders a more tangible discussion, and yet rigidifies its possibilities. But the conflict and tension regarding this anxiety about the imposition and manipulation of power and double crossing of the sacred found their way of expression in jokes.

permission for the surgery. He grew impatient, for after a long hesitation, one of the doctors finally told him: “dear hāji, we have no choice. We have to cut your leg. Would you give us the permission?” Hāji, [Ghadir Amiri] tried to sit up. He had turned red with anger. He said: “oh! We all had come to offer our lives; now you are asking my permission for a leg?”

Jabbāri goes on to give us yet another example of such “martyrdom seeking spirit” (roh-e-shahādat talabāneh) during the War. She writes:

Ghāsem Zamāni was also from the same type of species. A 12 year old kid who was severely injured and his belly was torn, but his only words were oh Mahdi; no crying or shouting, no moaning. One of the nurses asked him: “don’t you have any pain because you repeatedly say oh Mahdi (yā Mahdi)?” Ghāsem replied: “pain? Don’t even say or ask⁴⁵⁷ [implying that he is in so much pain that he cannot even put it in words], but ...I am afraid that if I cry or make a fuss, my reward would be diminished in the eyes of the Imam of the Age.”

If the generation, who has lived the revolution and the War, might relate to many of these stories, though with a nostalgic sense of that which is no more, for the “Children of the Revolution” the stories such as the ones told by Jabbāri are empty words, a mask that has to be removed so that the ugly reality can be exposed. The high moral standard set for an ideal Muslim citizen in such messages and the hypocritical double standard life that the revolutionary guards, basijis, and in general many state officials, lead have been ridiculed in numerous jokes including the one about the Front in the last chapter. They undermine the claimed superiority of the current members of revolutionary guards or

⁴⁵⁷ Another impossibility in translation: there are in every language, including in Farsi, phrases that are abbreviated, and have turned into idioms, the meaning of which are understood by the native speaker but no translation can convey them except through presenting them in long explanations. The phrase, “nagoo va napors” (don’t say or ask) is an example. It has become an idiom in Farsi that implies an intense emotional or physical state for whose expression, words are insufficient. One might be asked if one’s day was tiresome and the response may be “nagoo va napors” which would mean, yes, it was more tiresome that I can express. “Was that woman beautiful?” somebody might ask another, and “nagoo va napors” could convey the extreme beauty of the woman. It can however also be used in a negative and cynical way, the further difficulty for translation, for the only way to grasp and recognize it as a positive or negative response is through the tone and the gesture of the addresser.

basijis over “ordinary” people.⁴⁵⁸ In this sense, the joke confirms the views of Aristotle, Hobbes, and Freud, as pointed out by Berger, that one of the goals of jokes is to assert one’s undermined superiority or one’s equality to those it targets.

The jokes equalize the state officials, and in Charles Schutz’s words, include them in the same “common and continuing animality”⁴⁵⁹ for which they punish the people (1977: 38). They bring out the discrepancy between the portrayal of basijis, by the majority of Iranian populace, as drug dealers, bribery receivers, and hooligans, and such honorific expressions as: “God has the angles in the sky [heaven] and the basijis on Earth. Basij (the center to which basijis are related) is the place of self-actualization and worship. Basij is the place of the soldiers of the Imam of the Age (May God speeds up his return) and it is the site of the martyrs” (from the last will of martyr Yazdi quoted in Rahimi, 1997:90). Against these glorifying views of the basijis and pāsdārs, stand people’s everyday experiences.

Infinite stories are told about the way parties and funerals are disrupted by these guards or basijis and are resolved by offering a sum of money, sometimes a large sum. One constantly hears how “the pāsdārs and basijis are the most corrupt. They are womanizers (zan bāz), drug dealers, greedy for money and power.” Mr. Forozesh, a man in his forties who had worked with the revolutionary guards against drugs only to resent them with their “corrupted way of confiscating drugs from drug dealers to sell to the market again,” is not alone in his mistrust, nor is his mistrust without a basis in reality.

⁴⁵⁸ Manifest in the joke is, in Bataille’s words, “the constant problem posed by the impossibility of being human without being a thing and of escaping the limits of things without returning to animal slumber” (1989: 53).

⁴⁵⁹ In Political Humor, Schutz defines common humanity as “our basic biological drives and functions [that] strips away cultural superficialities to reveal man’s common and continuing animality” (1977: 38).

The comical theatre of Moral commandment

On a beautiful summer night, I attended the wedding of a former woman inmate friend in a huge nice garden, in Kardaj, a town near Tehran. The stars, dim lamps, and colorful dresses had a fascinating reflection in the blue swimming pool. Young and old, children and adults, were dancing to live music, which was played by a band of three young men. Evidently the songs were familiar to the people since they sang along with the vocalist while dancing to them. Alcoholic drinks were abundant, though in the kitchen, and not in regular bottles but in large pots. There was no separation of sexes, nor were the very revealing clothing of women imaginable if one believed in the rigidity of the state law on women's dress codes in Iran. The party had gone on for four hours and it was already midnight but the level of energy was so high that one could easily see the continuation of the party well to the morning.

The hosts announced that dinner was ready. People lined up along the long rows of torches and flowers which led them to the beautifully set tables of extravagant food. Just when half of the people were about to eat and the others were still waiting in line to be served, whispers were heard from different directions. "They are here. Cover your hair. Hide the video cameras." The orders were short and rapid but reactions to them were very different. "Who is here? What is going on?" I asked a former inmate friend. Her abbreviated response, "amākeniā", meant that the guards from the office of moral police, who are to handle the unethical or illegitimate relationships in private homes or such parties, were in the garden. "Worse than anything else," my friend said, "they are after video cameras and musical instruments." The hosts were in fact hastily helping the band to hide their instruments and then they were separated and disappeared in the

crowd. As my friend was hiding her own video camera, she explained that “they usually confiscate these video cameras to watch the films and identify participants in these parties. But they also love both cameras and musical instruments for they can sell them in the market and make good money on them.”

I looked around expecting to see a group of *pāsdārs*, “revolutionary guards, or “*basijis*” (paramilitary militia) with guns, who would suddenly turn the whole place upside down. But, there were neither guns, nor uniforms, nor did we hear any insults from the three people in plain clothes whom I was told were “*amākeni*.” The darkness of the night and huge trees had created a mysterious oblique visibility or even partial invisibility. We had already sat down to eat. I was not sure how to react. I looked around for my friends and other guests’ reaction. But it was all very confusing. Some were hastily running and I did not know then where to. It did not seem that hiding would in fact be possible if the guards were really there to find people. Later, I learned that most people had gone to their cars to hide there or to take their scarves and mantos and return covered and thereby legitimately visible. A woman was so nervously rushing to grab something to cover her hair that, in her hurry, she broke one of her high heel shoes.

The entire scene was extremely surreal. It was as though a hilarious comic play was being staged in front of my eyes. Contrary to those women who were hastily seeking a space out of sight, many seemed to remain rather calm and indifferent. “If the people from *Edāreh-ye Amāken* are here, people must be freaking out,” I thought to myself, drawing from my experiences of the early years after the Revolution. Yet, the fear was and was not there. Many did not even cover their hair until the whole “game” was over. The most amusing scene involved those women who had covered their hair with a little

table handkerchief. With that little cover on their hair, which of course covered a small portion of their hair, they walked around with their back naked all the way to the waist and their transparent stockings that revealed their legs. A few of us had covered our hair with large table cloths we had picked up from the empty tables around us. My friend looked so funny with her “hair cover” that I burst into laughter. Imagining my own appearance, I laughed even louder.

My friend pointed out the three men standing under a big tree right across from us and talking to two male hosts and said: “They are negotiating.” I asked: “Negotiating? Negotiating about what?” My friend’s husband responded: “About what? About money of course! What else?” With grinning cynicism he added: “They have smelt money. Wait and see how much they will make tonight.” I was a bit confused about people’s reaction so I asked: “If they often raid parties, why do women not keep their manto and scarf handy.” My friend corrected me: “But they do not often raid parties. In fact, most parties are not disrupted because everyone knows that to have a party like this you have to work things out with them first. People negotiate before their party and pay enough to be left in peace. Certainly, there has been a problem here either with their earlier negotiation, or a new guard has just joined them and they want more money. It is also possible that they might have heard that the host could afford to pay more than he has and they are here to “milk the host” (bedoshan)-to take, more.” Her husband added: “Nothing in this country is unresolved as long as you are willing to pay the bribery.” I was still concerned with reactions: “But, why do so many people seem so calm and indifferent to their presence? My friend offered a rather long explanation:

Oh, there could be so many different reasons. First of all, most people know that in the end the host is going to pay what they ask so

they would leave. There are really very rare situations where the negotiation does not reach a middle ground. Secondly, sometimes some kids playfully spread the rumor around to have fun watching people panic. So many people do not always take these whispers seriously until they see them with their own eyes. It is dark here so they might not have been able to see them. But in general it is the matter of knowing that it will get resolved. People have lived through this for years now and they know that nowadays, they rarely arrest people for such things unless there is more money in it. Very seldom you might come across one of them, who is really devoted to religious beliefs or the rules, so he might refuse to negotiate.

As we were talking, someone came and said that the problem was solved, though, he explained, it had been a tense negotiation and there were moments when they thought that it was not going to be resolved. The groom, an Iranian who had lived in the West for more than fifteen years, was not happy to pay even initially but now that they had come for more he was outraged and was refusing to pay. But he was finally convinced by his family that he had to compromise for it would be really bad for the family to let the guests be detained for they would blame the host for having been stingy and not willing to pay enough to subject their guests to such harassment. We in fact learned that the reason the guards had come for more money was their new information about the groom and that he was living in western Europe, and as people say in Iran, he was paying in “Tomān” (Iranian currency) while his income was in Euro. This meant that a large sum of Iranian money was a much smaller amount in Euro. After a relatively long negotiation, about 40 minutes or so, the groom had paid another 300/000 tomāns, about \$400 US dollars, and they had left. The dinner was already cold. But the band resumed its job in playing and singing and the dance continued as if nothing had happened. It was still going when my friends and I left the party at two in the morning.

On our way back, I kept wondering about the strange dynamic of this social phenomenon in which jokes, games, rumors, bribery, devotion, money, corruption, and mutual deception were reenacted in such a ritualistic manner. My puzzled reaction to this fantastic play of horror and comedy reminded me of the time in my early teens when I watched a comic movie, the second movie I had ever seen. I remember that when my family and I left the movie theatre, my eyes revealed to my brother that I had cried. He teased me for, according to him, I was so ignorant of cinema that I did not realize one did not cry but laughed at comic movies.⁴⁶⁰ I could not explain to him that I, in fact, found the things at which they laughed very painful. The image of one of the women at the party was playing over and over in my mind. In her fancy red night gown and her very high heel shoes, one of which was broken, she hopped and limped unevenly to grab a handkerchief to cover her blond dyed stylish hair, while her dress revealed her shoulders, her entire back, her arms, her breasts and neck. I laughed but I felt like crying. I could not but think about this whole scene as the manifestation of a performative, living joke, the joke of life in post-revolutionary Iran, with all its ironies and absurdities, with its tragic and yet hilariously comic quality. Suddenly, in my mind, her image was mixed with those last few days before the Revolution of 1979.

These were images of that readiness to die, that running from the bullets while carrying the injured bodies on one's shoulders; leaving the door of one's home open for those who, in escaping the bullets, would come in without their hosts knowing anything about them except that they had a dream for a better future and a desire to fight the

⁴⁶⁰ It was not that he had seen more movies than I. We had only recently moved to a town which had movie theatres. Because my father worked in the railway station, through which movies were transported, we could watch movies for free. However, my father was uncomfortable with us utilizing this "benefit" and insisted we pay to see movies. He did not like us to use his position to get free rides. We therefore did not go to the movies very often.

oppressor Regime; that bizarre sense of feeling safe to enter people's home in the middle of the night without paying attention to the sexes of those within; that readiness to help anyone who needed it without thinking of "exchange value" or "cash payment" (Marx and Engels: 1998); that joy of saving someone's life whose name you still did not know. Why these images?

I remembered Ferdous' agony in failing to reconstruct the ambiance of those days for her children so that they could understand that extraordinary sense of being part of a revolution. Were her daily experiences of indignity and suffocating cynicism also blended with her memories of those dreamy days of the Revolution? Did these memories also, in retrospect, seem to her to be the most real experience one has ever lived and yet as unreal as the scenes of the party I just described? My heart went to Ferdous, to Marziyeh, to Mrs. Mohhebi, to those veterans whom I met in the Rāzi Mental Hospital, for whom the War had not ended.

The man who still chanted, "Karbala Karbala we are coming." He had not yet awakened from his trance to realize that Karbala was not "rescued by the troops of Imam Hussein" but rather by the US "liberating" bombs. We knew this because, on our TV screen, we had watched the US liberate Iraqis by carpet bombing their homes. But the man in the hospital was still living in the time when Iranian veterans were to "salvage" Karbala. Neither he, nor that other veteran, who kept chanting "Down with Khomeini," knew how much had happened and how drastically things had changed since they had been imprisoned in time.

And there they were back in my mind, the images of the Iranian boys running towards death in their "Ya Hussein" headbands and the pieces of their flesh in

photographs that hanged on the walls of Martyrs' Museum in Beheshtzahra Cemetery. But why these images after I had witnessed those unsettling yet comic scenes of the wedding?

Token of Escape and Hope

As though commenting on the above experiences, Soren Kierkegaard suggests that “the comical is present in every stage of life” (quoted in Berger, 1995: 39), and the absurdity of the comical is an imitation of the absurdity of our lives. In Kierkegaard's view, there seems to exist no marked distinction between the comical and life as comic. Wylie Sypher goes a step further to ascertain that “the direst calamities that befall man seem to prove that human life at its depths is inherently absurd. The comic and the tragic views of life no longer exclude each other” (Quoted in Berger, 39). The absurdity of the joke in the previous chapter and the absurdities of life of which I speak here seem to confirm the above views. It is perhaps the absurdities of every day life that compels the Iranian youth to live their lives as though imitating a comic theatre and creating comic plays out of their daily lives.

My belated realization of this relationship led to my role in turning a nice afternoon of laughter and jokes into a serious discussion that brought about painful memories for Poyān. Ferdos, Poyesh, Payām, Poyān, and I were having coffee in Ferdos' living room when a series of jokes about veterans began to pour out of these three youngsters. Laughter was so loud and the competition over offering more radically hilarious and sexually graphic versions of the same joke or new ones so intense, that I could not keep up even with receiving them – especially since I often needed some kind of translation of new slang or new phrases that had become common in Iran in my

absence. While I was amazed by the shift in sexual norms, at least among this particular group of youngsters who openly discussed and joked about sexuality in front of a parent, Ferdous, and members of the opposite sex, I found the brutality of the joke disconcerting.⁴⁶¹ In a negative tone, I asked them how they could enjoy repeating and laughing at such brutal jokes. Poyān immediately responded: “Oh, do you know how they treat us, as if we are trash? You should see what kind of trashes they themselves are.” I began responding: “But how does their mistreatment justify these jokes?” I suddenly realized that I was in an absurd position of “preaching like the clergy members (ākhunds)” of which Payām and Poyesh often accused their mother and her friends. In fact many of the youngsters suggested that this was a common quality that almost all the activists of the “revolutionary generation” possessed. I stopped myself but I had already provoked Poyān and had reminded him of his bitter experiences. So he started talking about his father:

What about my dad? He spent so many years of his life in jail but he is not considered an āzādeh⁴⁶² (a former captive). Their own law says that those who have been in jail for more than two years under the Shah should be entitled as “āzādeh.” Do you know how different our lives would have been if he was recognized as an āzādeh?

⁴⁶¹ One of these jokes was about a veteran whose parents went to ask for the hand of a woman on his behalf. Gradually and one by one, the parents reveal to the woman and her family that their son the veteran has lost both his arms and legs. Every time they mention an organ missing, the woman says that it is a blessing from God to marry an injured and a lame veteran and that God would reward such a person. My friends' excitement reached its climax at the point when the family mentioned the loss of his second leg in addition to his two arms. They each offered their own version. In Payām's version, the woman says, “so just say that he is a samāvar”—a particular container that Iranians use to make tea. Poyesh, on the other hand, jumped in and said no, the woman said “just tell me if this samovar has a tap” referring to his genitals. Poyān was most adamant in offering a different version in which the parents had disclosed nothing about the groom's situation and the woman had agreed to marriage. Then, the veteran called the woman and began telling her about the loss of one arm, then another, then a leg. Finally, when he gives away the fact that he has no arms or legs, the woman says: “so, do you at least have the necessary tool?” again referring to his genitals. He then responds: “if I did not, then how could I have dialed your number?” suggesting that he had used his sexual organ to dial the number on the phone.

⁴⁶² Āzādeh literally means someone who has a free spirit, derived from the word āzād (free). Under the Islamic Republic, however, the term has taken a new meaning and refers to those who have spent time under the Shah as political prisoners or as captives of the war.

“Oh, I always thought that ‘āzādeh’ only referred to those who were War captives. Interesting! I did not know that the term also includes political prisoners under the Shah.”⁴⁶³ Poyān said: “Yes. This is the law” and added “but my dad is not willing to go and ask for this title. He says his integrity is more important than taking advantage of such entitlements and its benefits.”⁴⁶⁴ I asked him if he thought they would really grant this title to a leftist who was arrested and jailed in this regime too. “I don’t know. But he was so severely tortured under the Shah that he still suffers its consequences. Do you know how much I could have benefited from being considered a son of an ‘āzādeh?’ I could have entered the best universities of my choice and would not have to worry about wasting two years of my life in military service.” I said: “yes, probably” but Poyān interrupted and went on saying:

One of my classmates had such a low score in the university entrance exam that he could not have been admitted even in Āzad University [a less prestigious private university]. But do you know where he is now? In Tehran University and do you know why? Because, not even his father but his uncle was a martyr, so he used martyrs’ families’ quota and got in, in his first choice of major in Tehran University. There are veterans who have been to the front for a few weeks, sometimes as drivers, or cooks,...and have used that to gain access to many privileges. You don’t know how frustrating these things are.

I had touched on a sensitive issue. I was aware that most Iranians who did not belong to these “privileged categories” such as martyrs’ families, former veterans, or

⁴⁶³ It was in fact interesting to consider how the regime connected the revolution and the fighting for it, and thus its political prisoners, to the war and fighting Saddam; in this sense, both fights were in line with the more larger goal of fighting for Islam, social justice, you name it, but isolated fights of within and without the borders as such.

⁴⁶⁴ In fact, he eventually went to demand it for the sake of his son. Sadly, not only did this subject him to a round of informal interrogation, which not matter how light is never an easy experience for someone who has been through it again and again; he was also denied this “right.”

captives felt strongly against such quotas that had become the basis for discrimination among different groups of the population. The frustration was intensified when these privileges were appropriated even by those without these “legal” entitlements. There were non-martyrs’ families who sent their children to the special school for martyrs’ children simply through connections. Every Iranian knew someone, or some ones, who had abused this already tension-ridden law. It was often hard to recognize if the complaints were about the “corrupted system” that resulted in misuse or abuses of this law or the law itself. I tried to subtly address this question when I asked Poyān: “But would you have been really comfortable using the quota? Isn’t it true that you all are constantly ridiculing those who have gotten, in your words, a free ride? I am thinking about the implication of the term “sahmiehye” (the one who has used the quota), that has come to stand for incompetence. Would you then feel ok if others thought of you in that way?” Poyān offered an argumentative answer to my question:

Their logic supposedly is that these privileges are compensations for the death of the father that leaves the families without financial support. If this is true that the loss of father could negatively affect children’s education, then it should include us too. Besides, why should I pay for my father’s beliefs? For years, the children of the state martyrs have received great attention both from the government and the society. What about us? If those kids walked on the alleys and streets which are named after their fathers and were treated like kings and queens at school, we lived a life of lies and secrecy and fear. My mom had to leave me and my sister alone for hours to go to work. Our life was not fun!

Poyān’s usual cheerful spirit had nearly vanished. Something I could not name was reflected in his dark brown pupils, like a long gaze at a deep dark well. I was feeling guilty for changing such a light atmosphere to this heavy mood. I had seen similar drastic shifts of moods in other situations and in so many people in Iran. The abundance

of partying, dancing, singing and joke telling seemed to be mechanisms for surviving and dealing with the absurdities of traumatic experiences which seemed to haunt unoccupied moments. It was as if these “fun times” that the youth so desperately sought out worked for them as singing and music had for Kafka, which, according to Benjamin, were “an expression or at least a token of escape” (1968:118). Benjamin suggests that this “token of hope... comes to us from that intermediate world—at once unfinished and commonplace, comforting and silly” (ibid). These moments of joke-telling not only provided momentary escape from repeating a tragic and gloomy life by creating laughter; but it also allowed, as if in a carnival, the possibility of momentary liberation from sociopolitical rules. But it seemed that I had robbed Poyān of all this, by taking away the jovial atmosphere of jokes and of much more. For these jokes were also means of expressing anger and taking revenge. No wonder that the state’s categorical demonizing of its dissidents was mirrored by the categorized othering of its supporters by disillusioned Iranians.

The Humor of absurdities

Only a couple of months after my return to the U.S., Poyān phoned me from Iran and shared one of the everyday absurdities of his life experience with me. So frustrated and outraged he sounded that I immediately asked: “What’s wrong?” With a trembling voice, he told me how embarrassed and furious he had felt that day because, while working on his college project with a group of classmates, a guard had approached and taken him to the University’s Security Office (Edārehyeh Harāsat Dāneshgāh). I asked “Why, what had you done?” Perhaps also angered by my question, he agitatedly responded, “I didn’t have underwear under my jeans and apparently as I had bent down to

measure something on the ground, the guard who had been passing by saw part of my ass.” Even as he was talking to me of his feelings of humiliation, his tone still had that sense of turning it back on those who had brought it on him. In fact, the incident sounded so bizarre and surreal to me that had it not been for his angry voice I would have in fact burst into laughter. But he was telling me how he had to go through interrogation for not wearing underwear under his pants. I tried to joke about it. “You guys with those low cut pants. See I told you your love for fashion would lead you to trouble.” But then I took a more serious tone and asked him: “So what did they ask you about?” Now his tone conveyed a mixture of mockery and anger: “Oh I don’t know, as usual, the nonsensical stupidity. They asked why I didn’t have underwear; how often I came to school without wearing one; what motivation I had behind my act, and things in this line.” What did you tell them? I asked. “What could I tell them? I said that I did not have time to wash my dirty underwear so did not have a clean one to wear. That this was the first time that I had not worn one and that I had no motivation whatsoever except that I had been busy with my school work and somewhat lazy with the chores. That I live by myself and it is sometimes hard to keep up with all that needs to be done.” He was imitating the imaginary ambiance of serious political interrogation.

I could not help but exclaim: “God! They really enter their head’s into people’s pants,⁴⁶⁵ even into their underwear.” But again I cut myself short; I stopped myself and instead asked about the “event.” Was it anger in this tone or something else I could not tell when he answered me: “What do you think could happen? They made me write and sign a letter in which I promised that I would never appear in public without wearing

⁴⁶⁵ This is a Farsi expression: “entering one’s head into people’s pants” refers to being too nosy about other’s privacy.

underwear under my pants. Can you imagine being forced to write something like this?" I felt as though I could hear his words making their way out of his tightened jaw and through his squeezed teeth. "And do you know why they felt a little sympathy for me?" And again mockery had joined or mitigated his anger. "Because I am a man living by myself and have no woman around to do my chores for me... I was so exasperated that I felt like wanting to smash and break everything into pieces. But..." But he had not. Instead he had made this long distance call to me.

Was he calling me as a way of responding to my comment in Iran about "the cruelty of taking pleasure from brutal jokes?" Was he trying to convince me that their repulsive jokes were the inevitable outcome of their painful humiliating experiences? Did he expect my sympathy or was I his window out? Was his confiding in me a way out, to expose what hid within, or did I seem to him another pair of eyes with which he could look back into his home, into himself, from outside that was not too faraway? Was he seeking to see how this all looked in the eyes of others for whom it had not yet become either like any other everyday experience or too convoluted with other memories and scars that the emotional reaction did not seem to fit the situation? I had a sense that one could see all these elements combined in his calling me long distance. It seemed that he sought for someone in me who lived far enough and was an outsider enough to offer him a "fresh pair of eyes" to look back into the absurdity of the event, to see if there was a way to make sense of it. But also, I was an insider for whom he did not have to translate the entire scenario of cultural and moral implications of the event. In fact, my out of placeness had seemed appealing to many youngsters with whom I worked in Iran.

During my research, I was able to build a very close bond with the children of the martyrs of both groups, so much so that they sometimes competed among themselves to get closer to me, as I was told by some of them. Most of their parents also requested my direct or indirect intermediately role between them and their children. They asked me to talk about particular issues with them that had remained unresolved. Evidently I did not always succeed in bringing them closer, but both sides seemed to benefit from mediation that allowed them to communicate their issues with one another and a third party. Yet, my own situation was a rather complicated one.

I seemed to be enough of an insider to both generations not to feel burdened by too much translation in their relationship with me; and yet, having lived in the U.S. for over a decade at the time, they assumed that I had also acquired an outsider's eye. For the parents, I have lived their experiences and gone to the West "but had not lost [my] connection to and passion for [my] past," so "Mehrnosh, a former inmate, suggested. In her words, "so many leave for a few years and when they come back, they speak Farsi with an English accent; in fact they speak Fānglihs (a mixture of Farsi and English) and act as if they have forgotten all about who they once were." For the youngsters, I was often nearly as old as their parents without carrying their commanding and authoritative role. "With you I can talk about everything and yet have fun as if you were my age. To you I can reveal my secrets without getting in a fight," this was how Payām explained the difference between his relationship with me and with his mother. Yet, I think, the most important factor was that for both the parents and children, I was at once a text and a reader that allowed them to read themselves in and to be read. They communicated their subjectivities in this dialectical relation of reading and being read inside out. Like *shabih*

khāni in which the Pre-Islamic, Islamic, and newly developing global religiosity had come together as a commemoration of the Karbala Event, here as well, it seemed that I presented them with the potential of a safe enough exit which would allow for a new entrance.

But were these assumptions accurate? Was I really able to extend myself as far as that imaginary, or had I lost the former quality without having obtained the latter? Is this what anthropologists need to figure out in their relationship to their field when they are neither a native nor a complete outsider?⁴⁶⁶ I could not at the time dwell on these questions because a young angry man was calling me long distance and even when I suggested to call him back, it was still a financial burden, only now it was on me. Troubled by the burden of that assumed capacity in me, I told him. “I am glad you called and am so very sorry for what happened to you. But can I ask why you thought of calling me?” “I don’t know. I didn’t feel like calling my friends. I know it doesn’t make sense, for such things occur so frequently here. But I don’t know today I just felt that I had it; I felt fed up.” I asked: “How do you usually react to such situations? Do you express anger, cry, or...?”

I am usually comfortable crying but not in such situations. You know there is a huge difference between crying when you lose someone and this. Crying of sadness is often calming. I have cried over losing girl friends. I’ve had no problem with that. I am not, as you know, a macho man to think crying is a sign of weakness. But this is different. This is a cry of helplessness, a cry that replaces the rage you suppress; it belittles you even further. It leaves you empty and even unable to feel rage. I usually try not to cry in such situations. I usually take my anger on myself by going for a long fast run, or doing a heavy work out. But today I was too beaten up, don’t know why exactly but something was so broken in me that I felt I

⁴⁶⁶ These questions were and complicated by many anthropologists, interesting mostly female. See Lila Abu-Lughod (1993); Neni Panguria, 1995; Purnima Mankekar, 1999.

could not put my pieces together. I guess I felt so much rage inside and was afraid that I was not able to control it that I too beat myself up along with them. I felt like a beaten dog and I cried like one.

I imagined Poyān, a tall, muscular man and wondered how strongly his muscles must have felt the convulsions of keeping control and not responding physically to the guards, whom he described as half his height. I wondered what it felt for an athletic young man like him to feel so belittled, but to hold back and not smash things around him into pieces. I remembered myself not so much younger than him when as bullets killed demonstrators around me in 1979, madly I ran towards the bullets, chanting with all the force in my lungs: “Gun machine, Gun machine is the response to the enemies of the people” (mosalsal, mosalsal, javāb-e-zedd-e-khalgh ast). I remember coming back home that day with my voice nearly lost but I was somewhat satisfied that instead of crying and running away, I had been able to organize another demonstration around me, simply by force of the words. At the time it did not even occur to me whether I would have really been willing or able to use a machine gun had I had one, or if the words of the chant were a sufficient means in this battle.

I had heard from Poyān that he had never physically fought with anyone. I had even joked and told him that perhaps that was why his tongue was so bitter. But he was in fact a very gentle and sensitive soul. I could not tell if this was because he had been raised by his mother and other female friends or relatives until he was five years old, during which his father was in jail. Or if it was because when his father had returned from jail, the softness of his mother had come to a sharp contrast with his father’s sudden outbursts and his severe beatings. These beatings had frightened, shocked, and confused him. For he had not experienced any physical violence until then and when he expressed

anger and told his mom that he hated his father, the mother kept telling him how his poor dad had been tortured in jail and could not help himself. “I remember I promised myself that no matter how bad I get beaten, I won’t become violent.”

Refashioning the Self: Undesired Subjectivity

As I was contemplating the humiliation Poyān must have experienced having written and signed the letter about his underwear, another memory of not that long ago came to my mind. It was in the second phase of my research in Iran, in April 2005, when Poyān accompanied me in my trip to the southern part of Iran, the Iran-Iran War zone areas. He and I were “caught” sitting on a public bench in the plaza of Jāme’h Mosque in Khorramshahr, the town which was occupied by Iraqis for over two years during the first years of War.⁴⁶⁷ Ironically, the incident happened while we had gone there to make an appointment for my interview with a clergy member, Ayat-ullah Mosavi. He was known as the clergy who had stayed in the town for the first three months during the war, after which the Iranian side had to evacuate the town. I was excited about hearing Ayat-ullah Mosavi’s memories of the Iran-Iraq War and his thoughts on the present situation. Since

⁴⁶⁷ Now in retrospect, I can see how many factors had combined to lead to this ridiculously embarrassing situation, where we ended up being interrogated for having an illegitimate relationship on a public bench. But at the time all I felt was anger and humiliation. As I said in an earlier chapter, when we were visiting the south, we did not know that serious uprisings were taking place among Arab ethnic groups and the state. I can now infer that the large number of guards in the region had to do with these uprisings. Prior to our visit, I had not realized, and Poyān did not know, that the population of the town were either Arab speaking people who could not afford to migrate during the War or had migrated to nearby towns and cities and returned after the war, or they were merchants who had migrated from Isfahan after the war and bought cheap properties to build a life in this war-ridden area. This population was therefore in general more observant of *hejab* and codes of modesty. They were significantly less women who were not wearing black chadors than in most other places in Iran. I was not wearing a chador that day and Poyān had a tight short sleeve shirt on, with white pants. The majority of people coming in and out of the mosque were men, dressed either in military uniforms, or long black blouses and pants. Like during the early years following the Revolution, almost all the men had beards and looked very much like *hezbollahi*. I was struck by the number of revolutionary guards coming in large buses to the mosque or leaving the mosque. I remember telling Poyān how strangely uncanny it felt that the place looked like those early years of the war, except that the war was now fought on the other side of the border between some Iraqis and the U.S and British armies.

he was in the middle of his evening prayer sermon, Poyān went inside the mosque to wait and see him. I could not go in for I did not have a chador on that day.

I thus took my time to check out the books, tapes and CDs in the bookstores in the plaza, which were all religious materials. I felt the heaviness of the stares directed at me and realized that my appearance was unfitting for such a highly religious atmosphere. But while waiting, I wanted to make a good use of my time and see what kinds of materials were sold in these places. I was actually about to buy a few books when I suddenly came across one that was about Asadullah Lajevardi, the head persecutor of Tehran's Revolutionary Court and the chief of Evin Prison for most of the 1980s. Invocations of his horrific memories for the former inmates are not rarities, and I had almost always managed to deal with them calmly. But I am not sure why, perhaps because of the uncanny ambiance of the town which reminded me so much of the early years after the Revolution that suddenly I felt a rapid and strong, as if electric, shock running through my nerves; it made me tremble so bad that a man noticed and asked if I was ok. I was barely able to say yes and walk out of the bookstore. Still shivering, I sat on a bench in the middle of the plaza. A few minutes later, when Poyān came back, I was already much calmer but had not realized that tears were coming down my face. I felt my tears only when Poyān worriedly put his hand on my shoulder and asked why I was crying. As I was about to tell him that I was not, a man in a black shirt and beard, resembling so many of the interrogators of those early years, approached us and asked Poyān to get up and follow him.

Only a few feet away, the man began to talk to Poyān. I could guess what he was asking him: who I was; who he was, how we were related, why we were there, and so on.

I could even imagine that his tone was so accusatory that it would throw Poyān into a defensive and guilt-ridden mode. And yet for a short while I sat there and waited. It was as if I was outside of myself and watching the anthropologist in me take the role of an observer and leaving the “informant” resolve the problem. But I suddenly noticed Poyān’s paling face and in an instant all the old instincts seemed to resurrect in me. As I got up to go towards them, Poyān came to the bench and in an almost shaking voice said: “He is asking for our documents.” Loud enough for the guard to hear, I said “Nonsense! I will show no document just because someone likes to poke his nose where it does not belong.” I whispered to Poyān to stay quiet and let me “handle the situation.”

I pretended to have taken an upper hand, though I knew I had to negotiate our way out of this situation. So in a seemingly firm tone I asked: “What is this nonsense? Why do you think you can just go to people and ask for their documents?” He was prepared with the authoritative and accusatory tone of his own. I could not believe how with no hesitation he found the audacity to accuse me of having misled “this young guy” and using him for my “dirty lustful desires.” So ridiculous this all sounded that I was now genuinely angry and only later, in reflection, realized that I had succumbed into the very tactic that Iranians nowadays employ to deal with the authorities; they appropriate the ideas and language of the authority and turn them against it. I asked the man what kind of Muslim he thought he was when by wrongfully accusing people he washed their sins and brought them onto himself.⁴⁶⁸

I of course felt furious at this absurd accusation, “illegitimate relationship.” But I was even more surprised that, with such a marked age difference between Poyān and I,

⁴⁶⁸ The phrase in Farsi “washing people’s sin” (shostan-e-gonāh-e-mardom) refers to a religious view in Islam that considers accusing people of things without being sure of its truth is so unfair that it leads to the washing of their other sins, and the accusers taking on all the sins of the accused.

sitting on a bench in public should even raise such suspicion. So I asked the man: “How could you even think that? He is so young he could be my son and we are sitting on a bench with all these people around.” The explanation he offered could have written the entirety of this dissertation. It dismantled all the conventional views about public and private and question of gender and sex in post-revolutionary Iran. It showed how in flux the society and its phenomena are. More importantly it implicitly attested to the role of individuals and their performance in public in refashioning the nation. I recalled Poyān’s story about breaking the rules by “testing the temperature” and reaching for his girl friend’s hand. The man angrily commented: “I know he is not your son; if he were you would not have been sitting here. If you were “mahram” (religiously sanctioned relation of opposite sexes), you had your home to sit and chat.” I jumped in, “First of all I didn’t say he was my son but that he could’ve been; secondly are you saying that in this town mothers and sons no longer go out and if they did and got tired, they could not sit on a bench, because a dirty minded person like you may choose to suspect them?”

I could hear a little doubt in his tone, something that gave me motivation to go on with a more confident yet indirectly accommodating tone, a gesture of defiance and negotiation. He was now trying to claim his expertise beyond this little town. “I’ve seen so many of these women in Tehran. I’ve become an expert.” I interrupted him and said: if you are an expert then you should know better. Do I look like a woman who would pick up men, Do I?” It was as if he was afraid to say yes and have his expertise undermined. Now sounding a bit friendlier and less accusatory, he said: “things have gone really out of hand. There is so little concern with religious morays. Young men are in constant danger of falling into sins. They have become good prey for wealthy

widowed women.” While on one level, I was offended and angry, as an anthropologist, I was aware that there were so many things I did not know about this town and the effect of War on people its aftermath. I thought of the frustration this man might have felt in Tehran where he sees “so many of these women,” a situation over which he has little control. This little town and its “rare” public disruptions of the norms must give him a space for exercising his power, even though it is somewhat undermined by the common breaking of the rules in the rest of the country, especially in Tehran. He knows that sooner or later his little town will also be affected by the larger world. But my mind was also traveling to the past, to the War era, when the horror and loneliness must have brought strangers of different ages and sexes together, as it had done so with us in that house in Ahvāz, of which I wrote in chapter six.

“But just because you feel anxious about people’s moray, it does not justify your act of going around harassing people and accusing them of nonsense,” I had again resumed an authoritative tone but was also trying to ease his suspicion by offering information about ourselves. “You were right about one thing. We are not from this town. I am here for research and he is my assistant. He had just gone to make an appointment with Ayat-ullah Mosavi and if you had not taken our time with this nonsense, I would’ve known by now if the appointment is made or not. I then turned to Poyān and asked: “did you make the appointment?”

I had named the name, Ayat-ullah Mosavi, as if a secret code. I had also assumed an elitist position, “my doctoral research” and “my assistant,”--the very approach I had so adamantly always refused to take. He whispered something to a man who went to the mosque and soon came back with a single word, “yes” and the man was almost

apologizing as he told us we could now go. In the meantime, Poyān had also responded yes to my question about the appointment. In my mind, the memory of another “yes” flashed, the “yes” in the massacre of political prisoners, in 1988, which led those who said it to the line of survivors while “no” shot them down the mass graves. How embarrassingly humiliating that survival must have felt! One of those male inmates who had chosen the “yes line”⁴⁶⁹ in 1988, had described the feeling left of his survival as a “hole that was left inside me as large as life itself.” It was as if in bargaining to survive death, he had bargained out his life. It was life that was lost to him since the day he had survived death, so his wife told us. He ended up in a mental hospital before taking the life that had already been taken away from him. He however reclaimed the life he had lost to escape death by ending it himself.

On our way back, Poyān was happy that it was over and that I had “handled the situation really well.” I felt agitated and humiliated for the very talent that my sister was worried I did not have for I had not lived in Iran after the War “to learn how to play and defeat authorities in their own game; how to be as “ghāltāgh” (conniving) as they are.” But I had in fact taken on her advice: “negotiate your way out but act as if you have the upper hand, use your connections and your position of power, question their competence...” I realized that such confrontations with the authorities occurred more often in provincial areas than in Tehran, though transgressions were much more widespread and common in Tehran. While the fact that it had become widespread could partially explain the less confrontational approach in Tehran, the relationship between

⁴⁶⁹ The questions were simple: Are you a Muslim? Do You Pray? Do you support the Islamic Republic? If the first answer was no, the other questions were not even asked and the person was in the “no line” heading to graves and if yes, then all the other questions would follow. The survivors had to be separated from those with whom they came to this little show of Q &A, only to know that the “no” was the rope in their way into and the “yes” out of the world of the dead.

public and private in Tehran and in small towns is also an important factor. In small towns, everyone seems to know others and, in this sense, the public is nearly a private space for the natives of the towns. The presence of an outsider in public thus feels like an interruption or invasion of the private space of those native to the town. But all and all, the central issue is the battle over territorial boundaries of power and its claim to public and private as far as and wherever it can exercise.

The word “ghāltāgh” (conniving) kept pondering in my head, as I checked our back to make sure we were not followed and as I mechanically responded to Poyān who was now joking about the odor of socks in the mosque. The term was commonly used in Iran to refer to a person’s sneakiness in relation to others. But it had been a mystery to me when a few weeks ago my sister used it not to express anger at others, but to refer to herself and all Iranians who lived in Iran after the War. I felt puzzled by her at once sad and matter of fact tone when she suggested that “those of you who lived outside Iran after this period do not have the talent to deal with the complexities of our society. But here we have all become “ghāltāgh” (conniving).

Only now, after this absurd incident, the meaning of her simultaneously sad and matter of fact remark was beginning to unfold. I now deciphered her comment as a refashioning of a negative self, an undesirable but inevitable subjectivity, yet the one that seemed to be necessary to survive and handle daily realities and predicaments of this world. In this sense, the talent that people acquired to overcome their problems engendered a deeper involvement with and imitation of the very authority they despised. This was in fact the point that was made, over and over, by people I worked with and in a much larger scope, that despite all their disillusionments, people have come to live in

much greater symbiotic relationship with this regime than with that of the Shah. They explained to me that a unique feature of the Islamic Republic society is that from economic to religious ties, different mechanisms have been created to connect people to the regime and engender a strong relation of codependency between them.

Feeling like a “ghāltāgh” made me anxious and sad. I wondered how long it might take for one to acquire a thicker skin, of which Michael Taussig writes in his notion of acquiring a less sensitive nervous system because of its encounter by the constant shock of violence (1992). One cannot sustain, so I understand Taussig’s argument, the effect of the shock by acting in the “normal” sensibility of the nerves. New sensibilities have to be obtained for the nervous system to survive the impact of such a constant “state of emergency.” Is this really the case that the sensitivity loses its edge or is it just that the reactions change forms? I find this process analogous to what happens to language in jokes, which is a double translation, and double talk, where one says something while meaning something else, as Iranians claim nowadays every Iranian does. It is I think this transference of emotions from one situation to another that one encounters on a daily basis in Iran, the rage one does not know how to make sense of when people get into fights as they drive on the impossible traffic jam in Iran. The anger one has to live with on a daily basis from the customers and the salespersons in the market.

Thus, some of those Iranians who visit Iran after many years of living in the west would tell you that, “the truth of the matter is that people in Iran are still not civil and modern enough. They are not as friendly and well-behaving as the people that you see in the West. Have you ever seen in the US, the salesperson disrespect you as a customer?”

Mr. Āryā, the vice president of a computer company in Germany who had visited Iran after twenty five years was one of the several Iranian who lived abroad and expressed these views.

I read this elusive sense of “civility” and “ethical purity” that one could feel in the west, especially in the US, as the result of different modes of modernity and a different sense of subjectivity in relationship to the state. One can belong to a system in the US where one’s arms are stretched overseas to kill, to steal, to leave destruction behind in the name of liberation, and yet remain uninvolved and thus feel pure. It is due to our obscure relationship to the media where we see but are not seen; we watch crime but do not see ourselves witnesses to the crime that we watch on our TV screen night after night, for like closing our eyes, here too, we can simply switch the channel and it is all gone. So many friends I know in the US have told me that they never watch mainstream news channels. Thus one never learns how similar the propaganda is to that of the Iranian Regime, only more obscure. Only here one could not resist even paying taxes that could kill but still feel innocent. In Iran, the sense of subjectivities is still more related to a sense of being there and then. A revolution that is gone but the sense of being part of something is not entirely dead. A vague memory still lurks behind all these absurdities. This is the sense one gets when turning from the youngsters’ jokes to their poems, which seem so innocent and refreshingly frank. Thus it is with the spirit of the youth of Iran in this poem that I close this chapter:

*And now
 With every breeze
 With the whisper of the waves
 With the arising of the moon

 In those far away horizons*

*In those places one cannot see
And in my hand touching yours*

I want

*The right to satiety
The right of a seed bloomed under the soil
And the right of the cave-dweller human
The right of seeing your eyes
When they shine under the sun (Fall 2004)⁴⁷⁰*

⁴⁷⁰ Transliteration: “Va Inak man, bā vazesh-e har bād, bā najvāye amvāj, bā damidan-e māh dar an doorhā, dar jāhaye keh nemitavān did, va hengāmi tamāss-e dastān-e man bādaste tou, haghgh-e sirāb shodan, haghgh-e dānehyie shekofteh dar khāk, va haghgh-e ensāne ghār neshin rā mikhāham, haghgh-e didan-e chashmān-e tou, hengāmi keh dar āftab miderakhshand.”

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